The Anxious Achiever Chapter 4: The Past is Always Present

Jason Miller had always driven himself very hard—the first in his family to go to college, an excellent student, a senior executive at a global company—until he ended up in the ER at the age of 40, convinced he was having a heart attack.

Jason grew up in Sandusky, Ohio, surrounded by men who were living with potent yet hidden anxiety. He still remembers coming home from school one day to find that his dad had been laid off from his job at General Motors. At first eight-year-old Jason was excited about having his dad at home more often. “But that wasn’t what really happened,” he said, “because he was working too hard to find a way to make money.” Jason’s dad eventually started his own business, but the family continued to struggle. “It got to a point,” he said, “where we were literally not sure when there would be food on the table next.”

Jason vowed to go to college and find a career that ensured feeding his family would never be a concern. But as he advanced in the corporate world, old self-doubts resurfaced. He responded by working even harder—and getting more stressed out. He even changed roles in hopes that the stress of working in a “24/7, always on” global environment would dissipate, but it didn’t. He was losing sleep and constantly stressed, but still Jason tried to ignore his discomfort and power through. “I just thought, ‘I'm tense. So what?’” Jason said. “It's just the way it is, because I grew up in an environment where people are stressed all the time.”

One day, he said, he found himself suddenly short of breath, dizzy, and with tingling in his left arm. Knowing these were all symptoms of a heart attack, Jason and his wife and five-year-old son rushed to the hospital. After a full work-up, a neurosurgeon came to visit him. The tingling in his arm was due to a stress-induced back condition and a pinched nerve, and there were no signs he’d suffered a heart attack. Then the neurosurgeon told Jason that if he didn’t get his stress under control, he was going to die young.

That was the first time that Jason realized that one could literally die from uncontrolled stress and anxiety. He’d wound up in the ER, fearing for his life as his wife and son looked on, because in effect his body had dialed 911.

As a leader, you bring your past with you into every meeting, every negotiation, and, in fact, every activity you engage in. That's true even if you're unaware of how your past is influencing your present behavior, and how it's affecting others.

That's why, when an interaction or a situation triggers an anxious response at work, you should try to examine why. You might be reluctant to delve into issues from your childhood, but as Jerry Colonna, the legendary leadership coach, author, and CEO of Reboot.io puts it, unfinished business from your past is very much present in, and relevant to, how you lead today.

Anxiety is a Signal

Symptoms of illness or disease provide us with vital information: fever and fatigue, for example, alert you that something is amiss in your body. Acting on that information can restore your health or even save your life. Anxiety—a symptom of dis-ease, if you will—works in much the same way.

Amanda Clayman, a financial therapist who frequently counsels people through their anxieties about money, described how this works. "Anxiety is a signal, it's information," she said. "Its purpose is to bring our attention to something, to shock us out of automatic thinking and say, 'What is this thing that feels yucky, that I need to attend to?' [Anxiety] is there to keep us safe."

Amanda distinguishes between "signal" and "noise" anxiety, or helpful and unhelpful anxiety. "Anxiety is supposed to alert us to danger," she said, "but its job is to alert, not to assess." It's our job to sort the signal from the noise. Signal anxiety provides reliable information; it alerts us to true threats. Noise anxiety, on the other hand, is the unhelpful, irrational anxiety that impairs our functioning. Though noise anxiety does get our attention, it's a distraction. "It's a drag on our ability to process and make good decisions," Amanda said. This kind of anxiety can often be traced back to childhood, or to a traumatic experience. "We learn through experience what we think we need to be afraid of in the future," Amanda said. "So anxiety is almost always reactive to something that's happened to us in the past."

Marc Brackett, Ph.D., founder and director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and a professor in the Child Study Center of Yale University, agrees that anxiety is a key provider of information, and expands this to include all emotions. He says we should learn to be "compassionate emotion scientists" rather than "critical emotion judges." Why? "Because emotions are information," said Marc. "They're a guide." He recommends that we label our emotions, because each one is an invaluable clue, and

then, acting as a compassionate emotion scientist, we should question each feeling's merit. Is it helping us with the task at hand, or is it hindering?

"By way of example," he said, "being granular and specific about my feelings is information that says, 'Marc, maybe this is the wrong path for you.' But don't just go with your gut instinct—really dissect it. Is it just your fear of failure showing up here, or is this really something that you don't want to do and believe is a dangerous way forward?"

The night Jason Miller realized his stress and anxiety had reached life-threatening levels, he made a list of all the things that were worrying him. The list quickly filled the page, vividly demonstrating why he'd landed in a hospital bed.

"'This is what's happening inside of me,'" he said, "which is all the stories I'm telling myself about how I am a phony and a fake, and I'm worried about being caught and not being taken care of, and failing and losing money, and losing security, losing the house…. That was a really, really hard moment, but it was my wake-up call. I literally said to myself, 'If I have the power to do this to myself, I have the power to do anything I want.'" Jason acted on the information his anxiety yielded by taking a three-month leave of absence, during which he got into therapy, began working with an executive coach, learned mindfulness meditation, and began yoga and physical therapy. He spent more time in nature, and prioritized time with his family.

At the end of his leave, Jason went back to work, though it felt "scary as hell" to return to a high-pressure, high-stress environment. "I wasn't stress-free," he said. "Stress never goes away, but now I had all these tools and capabilities to manage it more effectively, and I stayed with it." He also brought back a stronger, more authentic self, a toolset built upon yoga and mindfulness, and a new venture into executive coaching and leadership development. Beneath all that stress and worry and the acting out of old patterns was a true self waiting to emerge, one that led Jason to a sustainable lifestyle and a more fulfilling career. "My limiting story I was telling myself was keeping me from giving my gifts," Jason said. "And that was a big part of the racket I had going on…. My true nature was being suppressed into this identity I felt like I had to manage and keep up."

Anxiety is one of our most valuable messengers. It alerts us to danger, and danger comes in many forms. Sometimes, anxiety signals us that we're headed down the wrong path, or about to make an unwise decision. Sometimes, anxiety is the byproduct of not living your truth. Are you living out someone else's dreams and expectations? Are you hustling in order to prove to yourself or your family that you're worthy? Sooner or later, anxiety will let you know that. And when anxiety is chronically ignored, the signal will become louder, more insistent, as it did for Jason.

You can parlay the information that anxiety yields into all sorts of improvements and better outcomes: higher productivity, increased empathy, better communication, deeper motivation, maybe even a career that's a better fit. And you can stop right there.

But for anyone who wants to get to the bottom of their anxiety and gain the sort of self-awareness that's required for deep transformation and healing, and a leadership journey that brings personal fulfillment as well as the kind of skill that inspires entire teams and even organizations to be their best, you'll need to look to the past.

The Legacy of Childhood Experiences

CEO coach, venture capitalist, author, and all-around wise person Jerry Colonna believes that many of the leadership problems we face—anxiety, avoidance, impulsivity, denial, anger, toxic relationships, and sometimes things like drinking or drug abuse—spring from our fundamental childhood experiences. This is unwelcome news for many people, and I get it. Do I really have to examine my relationship with my mother, you might be thinking, in order to be a better leader?

Well, probably. Think about it: It's not as if our personal histories vanish the minute we arrive at the office or log on. Each of us has a long and detailed history that we carry with us wherever we go, and we're all products of our past circumstances and the complex set of influences that shape us, so at least some of our past experiences and influences are bound to have an effect on our leadership. We might be able to build powerful careers while engaging in bad behaviors and unhealthy reactions, and we've all known people who've done it. But understanding how your childhood shaped the adult you are today allows you to be a great leader.

Our early influences are usually a mixture of positive and negative, but the negative influences have a way of being "stickier"—more memorable, and their effects more enduring. Psychologists refer to this hardwired tendency as negativity bias. It's thought to be an evolutionary advantage that, once again, is rooted in our basic survival instinct: Remembering encounters with negative stimuli helps us avoid those encounters in the future.[1] But in our present circumstances, the negativity bias can sometimes trigger disproportionate responses. It can cloud our judgment, causing us to miss or discount a positive development because we're so fixated on the negative, and it can make us *too* cautious, unwilling to take risks or move ahead in an attempt to stay small, unseen, and safe.

[1] https://positivepsychology.com/3-steps-negativity-bias/

Groundbreaking research on ACEs—adverse childhood experiences that occur before the age of 18—demonstrates how negative events that happened to us in the past affect us for years to come. In the original ACEs study conducted in the mid '90s, researchers identified three types of adverse childhood experiences that led to later negative outcomes: *abuse* (physical, emotional, sexual); *neglect* (emotional or physical); and *household dysfunction* (divorce, an incarcerated parent, or witnessing violence, substance abuse, or mental illness in the home).[2] Since then the categories have expanded to include community and systemic adverse experiences, such as racism and chronic poverty, and dozens of studies have been conducted using ACE data.

Among the findings, two key points emerged: 1) ACEs are very common, and occur across all demographics: more than two-thirds of the population report experiencing one ACE, and nearly a quarter have experienced three or more. 2) There is a "powerful, persistent correlation" between the more ACEs a child experiences and the risk of negative outcomes later in life—and those outcomes affect all areas of life. Researchers found "a dramatically increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression, substance abuse, smoking, poor academic achievement, time out of work, and early death,"[3] and more recent research revealed a clear link between ACEs and experiencing financial stress in adulthood.[4] Childhood ACEs can increase the likelihood you will be an anxious adult.[5]

Systems clearly matter, too. The experience of growing up Black in America, for instance, a country operating from a racist social system, can create anxiety that begins in childhood and builds into adulthood. A 2016 study found "experiences of individual, cultural, and institutional racism may constitute a culturally specific factor that is linked to anxiety in Black American populations."[6] There is data that members of lower castes in the Indian system of social ranking have worse emotional wellbeing than members of higher castes. Women suffer more than men in these systems.[7] The impact of trying to get an education, build a secure life, and develop a career in racist, patriarchal, rigid social systems can create anxious achievers. After all, as psychologists Akshay Johri

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[2] https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Facestudy%2Fabout.html

[3] https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/

[4] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8428486/

[5] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2822662/

[6] https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennifer-Martinez-18/publication/290157366_The_Mediating_Role_of_Internalized_Racism_in_the_Relationship_Between_Racist_Experiences_and_Anxiety_Symptoms_in_a_Black_American_Sample/links/61df5604323a2268f99ebcfb/The-Mediating-Role-of-Internalized-Racism-in-the-Relationship-Between-Racist-Experiences-and-Anxiety-Symptoms-in-a-Black-American-Sample.pdf

[7] Johri, A., Anand, P.V. Life Satisfaction and Well-Being at the Intersections of Caste and Gender in India. *Psychol Stud* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-022-00667-6

and Pooja V. Anand write, ”an individual’s well-being cannot exist in a vacuum. It is dependent on various social and structural processes larger than the individual.”[8]

Susan Schmitt Winchester, a C-Suite HR leader and the author of *Healing at Work*, believes one of the best places to unlearn and recover from the harmful effects of difficult experiences from our past is the workplace. Susan acknowledges that this is the last place many of us think of when it comes to working on our psychological stuff, but she points out that unlike our families, there’s choice on both sides when it comes to work: we choose our place of employment, and our employer chooses us. And let’s face it, as most of us spend the majority of our waking hours at work, our unresolved issues and old wounds are bound to show up there. All of our old triggers from the past, Susan said, “may be sneaking into our workplaces every day and causing havoc.”

Susan calls this “living the unconscious, wounded career path.” Often, people assume they don’t have issues from the past to deal with because they don’t have a history of trauma or ACEs. But both Susan and Jerry Colonna point out that we are all wounded in some way—which is to say we’ve all experienced dysfunction in our early lives. For example, people who lived with an overly critical parent, Susan said, or a parent who was overbearing or unpredictable, experience some of the same limiting beliefs and adverse effects as those with a history of trauma.

In search of a term broad enough to encompass this group of adults, Susan and her collaborator came up with *adult survivors of a damaged past*, or ASDPs. In the term itself, though, are important clues to how we can heal—and even find hard-won advantages from our old wounds.

As adults, Susan said, our choices are no longer dictated by parents or other caretakers, and on a deeper, psychological level, we no longer have to be reacting to the impact of past adversities. “We don’t have to be prisoners to the past,” she said. “‘Survivor’ is, I think, a hopeful word of resilience that whatever dysfunctional dynamic you experienced when you were younger is also a great gift in teaching the ability to manage difficult situations.” The opportunity for ASDPs, she said, is to realize that we don’t have to live with whatever heavy burden our past experiences left us. “Damaged,” Susan is fond of saying, “isn’t doomed.”

If the first step is to recognize that gaining new insight and understanding of our past will make us happier in the present, the second is to realize that we have the power and the agency to do so. But then, how do we actually engage in the work of healing at our workplace? One of the most effective ways to heal *and* to become a more effective

[8] Ibid.

leader is to pay attention to what triggers us at work. “What I’ve noticed about myself and others,” Susan said, “is that when someone has a reaction to something that’s occurred in the workplace, and it seems to be a much stronger reaction than the facts of the situation would suggest...that’s a clue that the person may be having a response that is fueled from something that happened in their past.”

When you find yourself reacting in such a way, Susan advises asking yourself, “Am I sure?” For example: Am I sure my boss is angry with me? Am I sure my colleague’s silence means they disapprove of my work? Am I sure I need to recheck my work ten more times? Answering this question often reveals that our triggered reactions are out of proportion to the event—a sign that old hurts and unresolved issues are influencing our present behavior.

But here’s the thing: not all of the effects of old wounds are negative. Just as anxiety can be a superpower if we learn how to tap into its generative aspects, many of the negative lessons and experiences we learned in childhood can manifest in positive leadership skills.

Jerry Colonna shared one way this can work. Sometimes, when a child grows up in an environment in which a parent or significant caregiver is absent, unavailable, or unreliable, the child must assume responsibility for the physical and emotional wellbeing of other family members. It’s not a desirable scenario, but one of its silver linings is that the child receives early lessons in developing resilience, and in being a caring leader who is responsible for each member of their team. “This is a really important message,” Jerry said. “These wounds don’t necessarily result in only negative behaviors, like, say, conflict avoidance as a result of growing up with violence. They result oftentimes in very, very powerful positive experiences, such as the ability to step into uncertain situations and to craft a vision and a way to be.” In the best-case scenario, Jerry said, adult leaders who’ve experienced early adversity are left with “the inner resources to be able to withstand shocks because they’ve already experienced them.”

Susan’s Rapid Power Reclaim Method

Susan Schmitt Winchester developed a three-step strategy she calls the “rapid power reclaim method” for times when you're feeling extremely anxious and overwhelmed at work. We’ll use a classic tough moment—receiving negative feedback—as an example. Here’s how to keep yourself from “spiraling down on that unconscious wounded career path,” as Susan said, and stop yourself from overreacting.

Step 1: Create choice. Remind yourself that you have the power not to get lost in the trigger and respond with old, automatic patterns—you’re an adult now and you can choose how you respond. Susan recommends finding some way to purge the physiological and emotional

energy you're feeling so you'll be less reactive and see more clearly. Deep breathing, drawing or journaling the feelings, hitting a pillow… anything to get the emotion out of your system. If you're in the middle of a meeting, Susan says, it's okay to ask for a 10-minute break.

Step 2: Elevate action. Here's where you implement a new, healthier response. In the case of negative feedback, elevating your action may be approaching the feedback with an attitude of open curiosity. "Rather than going into defense [mode]," said Susan, "I'm going to ask questions to understand it. I'm going to really focus on what I can learn from this feedback versus beat myself up with it." If you're especially triggered, simply responding with "Say more" opens up the conversation and prevents you from shutting down. "What advice do you have for me?" is another way to elevate your action in the moment and respond in new, more productive ways.

Step 3: Celebrate and integrate. Having a different response to an old trigger is worthy of celebration! Mark the occasion with a positive activity you find rewarding. Celebrating successes creates new neural pathways in the brain, Susan says, and integrates this new response into your identity.

One of the most helpful lessons I've learned is that when present-day circumstances stir up old, unresolved hurts from childhood, we re-experience the same level of fear we felt as a child. For example, if you've ever wondered why even a slight rejection can leave you shaky and near tears, or why the edge you think you detect in your boss's voice can make you ruminate for hours on what you did to make them angry, look back to your past: How would four-year-old you feel if the parent you depended on for survival rejected you, or the caregiver you relied on for safety launched into a rage? If we've never dealt with these early negative experiences—which truly are terrifying to a child with no power and no agency—we can succumb to automatic reactions, and misperceive the level of threat we're encountering in the present.

So now, when my anxiety seems especially irrational—when I know there is no true threat to my survival but it *feels* like there is—I address the past instead of the present. I remind myself to pause, do some deep breathing, and look inward at the small, frightened child who still lives within me. I picture her in detail: five-year-old Morra, defenseless and hypervigilant and desperate to please, peering up at adult Morra, who has so much more power, experience, and wisdom. How can Adult Me help Five-Year-Old Me feel better? Sometimes I picture Adult Me bending down and scooping up Child Me as I would one of my own frightened children, holding her until she calms. Sometimes I gaze at her with all the compassion and gratitude I can muster, and tell her she's okay now, that she doesn't have to work so hard to keep me safe any more. Sometimes I simply picture Adult Morra grasping Child Morra's hand, and leading her to some better, safer, happier place.

I've found these visualizations to be powerful, and deeply trustworthy. If you feel silly trying them out, just remember two things: One, this is a private exercise; no one has to know. Second, and more importantly, you are healing yourself. Think of how powerful this is—you need real strength to face your fears and do this type of work. "Warriors are not unafraid," Jerry said. "A warrior acknowledges there's wisdom in the fear. Fear is the wish to keep you safe. It's reckless and foolhardy to deny fear. The strength comes when we choose to act in the face of fear."

No matter how damaged or helpless you feel, you have the power within you to face your fear and heal yourself. And like a muscle, that power grows stronger the more you use it.

Building on Bowen: Your Workplace as a Family System

We often joke that our offices are like families...large, dysfunctional families. It is funny, and yet we all know how complex and difficult it can be to maintain healthy relationships amongst any group of people, be it a family, a community organization, or a team of coworkers. Bowenian theory is one of many frameworks for understanding the ways in which familial dynamics can get replicated at work.

Bowen family systems theory, developed by psychiatrist and researcher Dr. Murray Bowen, says that the best way to understand people—their character, their motivations, their personality, their behavior—is within the context of their family relationships. Bowen believed that the bulk of the problems we experience in adulthood stem from the negative ways we learned to manage stress and anxiety in our families of origin.[9] As adults, we automatically replicate behaviors that we adopted in our family, where we all played certain roles (if anyone has ever referred to you as a "golden child," for example, that's a role you played). You've learned to play a role and expect that the other players expect certain behaviors of you, and you expect the same of them. Whether we're aware of it or not, those early lessons and roles recreate themselves at work, which is why it behooves us to understand our role in the "family system" that is our workplace.

In short, systems theory (or systems thinking) proposes that everything is a part of a larger, complex system, and that each part of that system—whether it's a member of a family or an employee at an organization—is interdependent and interrelated. Thus, changes to one part of the system affect all the other parts of the system, as well as the system as a whole.

[9] https://www.thebowencenter.org/introduction-eight-concepts

It’s easy to see how systems thinking plays out at work, as organizations are made up of divisions, departments, teams, and individuals. Even small businesses and independent contractors are part of a complex system, as they operate within their particular system of products or services. So effective leadership will always require not only individual self-awareness, but group awareness, as any group of people in relationship to each other becomes a system.

Paul English, the serial tech entrepreneur and philanthropist who co-founded Kayak, among many other companies, has taken a systems thinking approach to management, and believes that one of his CEO superpowers is his ability to observe human dynamics at play. This involves listening with full attention to everything that’s being said, but also tuning in to the unspoken interplay between people in a room. He described how growing up in a tiny house with nine people made him hyper-aware of dynamics by necessity. “I think that trained me to really focus on interactions,” he said. “And I would say five percent of the time I spend in each of my companies is watching interactions.”

Paul first became aware that he was noticing people at work in the way he noticed family members at home shortly after he made the transition from computer programmer to manager. It was a difficult transition, he concedes, in part because the old playbook he used as a successful programmer—being prolific and fast—didn’t translate to managing people. For that, he needed to dial back into his early, informal training in human dynamics. “I learned in my first few years [of management] that if you pay attention to people and see what's on their mind,” he said, “you can make them happier and more productive.”

Paul took this skill all the way up the chain. “I think the biggest skill for a CEO,” he said, “particularly for a high-pressure startup where you're really going for it, is removing stress and trying to develop a team which has the mojo. And if you want a team which is exciting to work on and to work together, you have to become observant of interactions.”

If you can understand the dynamics that drive your team, and the forces that affect their collective mental health and that trigger anxiety among your staff, you can work towards building a cohesive, high-performing team that can accomplish extraordinary things—in Paul’s words, a team with the mojo.

We need that more than ever in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, as psychotherapist and author Esther Perel points out. “A collective trauma, a collective event, a global pandemic like this demands collective resilience, not individual resilience,” she told me. “And that means that you tap into the collective resources that lift all boats and reach out to the coping strategies of the group in a way that involves mass mutual reliance.”

She advises that we examine the ways our teams and organizations made it through the pandemic (and I would add, any experience of collective anxiety or trauma). What new ways have you learned to rely on each other? What new insights and practices do you need to retain in order for the entire group to continue to develop? “Because that degree of interdependence is what allowed us to continue to work as well as we have,” Esther said. “Let's not lose it.”

Using Systems Thinking to Refresh Your Leadership

One of the most important principles in Bowen family systems theory is called “differentiation of self.” In simplest terms, it refers to the ability to think and act independently while staying connected to others. Differentiation goes back to your family roots. People who are less differentiated have trouble separating themselves from the emotions and wants and needs of their family. Their emotional boundaries are porous—if their mom is sad or anxious, they get sad and anxious, too—and thus they live more at the mercy of feelings, theirs as well as others’.

Not surprisingly, people with a poorly differentiated self depend heavily on the acceptance and approval of others. Bowen observed that they either quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others (Bowen called this group chameleons) or they dogmatically insist on what others should be like and pressure them to conform (Bowen called these people bullies). Interestingly, bullies depend on approval and acceptance just as much as chameleons do, and conflict threatens them just as much. The difference is that bullies push others to agree with them instead of with others.[10] In both cases, the less differentiated person is using others to seek reassurance that they’re okay and to gain a more solid sense of self, rather than generating a sense of “okayness” from within.

In contrast, people with a well-differentiated self recognize their dependence on others, but they can separate their thoughts and feelings from the thoughts and feelings of other people. In the face of conflict, criticism, or rejection, they can stay calm and clear-headed enough to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of facts from thinking clouded by strong emotion. They’re able to respond thoughtfully, rather than react automatically, and those responses emerge from their own internal values and desires, rather than from pressure from outside forces, such as a person or group they’re trying to please. Because their individual sense of self is differentiated and well developed, they live less at the mercy of feelings, and they can be with others in the

[10] https://www.thebowencenter.org/differentiation-of-self

midst of strong emotion and not necessarily absorb that strong emotion themselves.[11] They don't need to jump in and fix things or rescue people, because they have a greater ability to tolerate discomfort.

These are broad descriptions, of course, but I bet you can already see how varying levels of differentiation of self can play out in the workplace—and how having a higher degree of differentiation can make you a more effective leader. When you are differentiated you are able to work from a sense of your true self. You can anchor in your core beliefs and values and operate out of a firm foundation, rather than react reflexively or be swayed by the constantly shifting conditions that characterize so many work environments.

To learn more about how we can use family systems thinking to enhance our leadership or just improve everyday office dynamics, I reached out to Dr. Kathleen Smith, an expert on Bowen family systems theory. She explained that at lower levels of self-differentiation, anxiety in any group context can get expressed in two main ways: overfunctioning or underfunctioning. These two strategies are what we learned from our family of origin, and they represent the quickest means we have of calming ourselves and everyone else down when anxiety strikes. They're both autopilot *reactions* rather than thoughtful *responses*.

I've found the concept of playing overfunctioning or underfunctioning roles one of the single most helpful guides to navigating not only my leadership anxiety, but my marriage and my role at home. I'm a classic overfunctioner.

When it comes to anxiety in the workplace, overfunctioning is more common, especially among leadership, and can even be prized. But Kathleen points out that in Bowen theory, both overfunctioning and underfunctioning are considered to be at the same level of differentiation. Both offload the responsibility for managing your own personal anxiety elsewhere.

The overfunctioner responds to anxiety by taking on too much responsibility. They direct people, maybe even to the point of being controlling. They tend to believe that nothing gets done without their advice or assistance. Because the boundary between the overfunctioning leader's sense of self and others' is porous, they see others as extensions of themselves, and assume they know others' thoughts and feelings. Especially in anxiety-provoking situations, they can misjudge others' capabilities, leading them to jump in and resolve a problem or "rescue" colleagues rather than

[11] Ibid.

trusting them to get the job done. It's easy to see why: Fixing the problem relieves their anxiety.

It's also easy to see why the classic overfunctioning leader can look really successful, and be highly valued by a team or organization. But Kathleen cautions that overfunctioning is actually "a pseudo-strength," and there can be a high price to pay. "If they aren't able to direct others, or if others don't go along with [their directions]," Kathleen said, "all of their capability has a steep decline."

As does their self-esteem and their confidence. When we're overfunctioning, Kathleen went on, "we get propped up in our own functioning by acting as if other people are an extension of ourselves, by functioning for them. And often, that's what leads to burnout." It can also lead to frustration and disappointment when the people who stand in as extensions of ourselves don't perform well or become less capable. It's also a huge burden to carry others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors! All of this is why overfunctioning is a pseudo-strength, and why in the long term, it isn't sustainable.

Underfunctioning, on the other hand, can look like passing the buck, playing it safe, or depending on others to solve problems rather than getting involved yourself. Underfunctioners underestimate their own abilities, and are more than happy to let others take over when things get difficult. Which brings up an important point: Overfunctioning and underfunctioning are reciprocal. Overfunctioners cope by getting involved in others' problems. Underfunctioners cope by getting *others* involved in *their* problems. These two dynamics can't exist without each other.

Notice, too, that both are trying to resolve their own anxiety through other people. The overfunctioner's attitude is, "I need to get overly involved and problem-solve for others so I can calm my own anxieties." The underfunctioner's is, "I need someone to get overly involved and problem-solve for me so I can calm my own anxieties." The Bowen response is that both the overfunctioner and the underfunctioner need a stronger differentiation of self—and developing a stronger differentiation of self has nothing to do with changing the behavior (or thoughts or feelings) of the other, and everything to do with learning to regulate your own emotional functioning.

The leader who can regulate their emotions and remain clear-headed and calm in the midst of a challenge is the one who can lead a team through any experience of collective anxiety and inspire them to perform at their highest capability, rather than "infecting" the system with their personal anxiety and squandering time and energy doing others' jobs for them. "This is why self-regulation is such a key component of leadership," Kathleen writes. "Leaders who are running around trying to put out anxious

fires, instead of staying calm themselves, are largely ineffective." But leaders who can manage themselves and inspire calm, she says, can communicate to each member of the team that they're capable enough to "find a path through the chaos."[12]

I love this advice, and no matter our role, we all need to take responsibility for our own emotions and behaviors, which affect each member of the "family system" at work, whether we're aware of it or not. When we're operating without awareness, it's so easy to get caught up in automatic reactions that at best, only reduce anxiety for the short term, and at worst, lead us down a dark path of unhealthy coping mechanisms that become bad habits.

Perhaps you grew up in a house where your mother was always in a panic. Your brain learned to think "Fire!" all the time, even though there wasn't a fire. As an adult, your panic button may still be easily triggered. Being less differentiated can create more (and exhausting) reactivity, because you're always at the mercy of other people's emotions and the unfiltered effect other people's emotions have on you. A terse email from your boss causes you to lose a night's sleep because you instantly go into panic mode. Or if a colleague is upset you assume it's your fault and it's your responsibility to fix it...and BOOM you are so anxious. All of this makes perfect sense, given the family system in which you grew up.

But you're an adult now, and you don't have to repeat old patterns. You can step back from the automatic thought, ask yourself "Is there really a fire?", and then tell your anxiety, "Thanks, you've done your job, but there's no fire and you can be quiet now."

Being a responder rather than a reactor lowers the tension throughout the entire group. Reactors build off other reactors, so things can easily escalate. Think about the urgency of a client situation when two anxious reactors are in charge, and how good it can feel when someone calm comes into the room and brings the temperature down. Imagine if you could be that calm person for yourself!

It's Never Too Late

Fortunately, thanks to the brain's amazing neuroplasticity, there's plenty of opportunity to get better at self-differentiation as an adult. "You actually are not locked into these mechanisms 100 percent," Kathleen said. "If you can begin to observe them, you have an opportunity to step back and ask yourself, 'Is this really what I want to do?' When the chips are down, is there a different, more flexible, more creative way of responding to

[12] https://kathleensmith.net/2019/05/15/the-gift-of-self-regulation/

an anxious person, to a challenging colleague, to an impossible family member? Can I put up with the discomfort of not doing what I normally do?"

Learning to tolerate discomfort—your own as well as other people's—is a key aspect of differentiation of self. It allows us to pause before acting—not assume we know what others are thinking, not make impulsive decisions, not take on too much responsibility, and overall, not operate on autopilot in the face of anxiety. "That's what it means to work on one's own differentiation," said Kathleen. "To operate a little bit outside the emotional system while still being in the thick of it."

For the overfunctioner, who has trouble tolerating another person's distress, a good first step is to plan ahead: Instead of the old automatic reaction of taking over and managing someone else, what could a more differentiated response look like? That may mean having "to watch people flail a little bit," Kathleen said. Instead of immediately rescuing them, a healthier response would be to "slow down and let people do things less efficiently" than you would, and to listen to their thinking, even if you disagree with them or think they're flat-out wrong. Doing others' jobs for them and refusing to hear their points of view undermines their autonomy, and denies them the opportunity to step up, grow in their roles, and become more effective. The more differentiated response, Kathleen said, "opens up the space for you to be surprised by other people's capabilities…. Sometimes the best gift you can give someone…is to step back and let them function for themselves."[13]

Whereas overfunctioning can stem from an inability to tolerate another person's distress, the inability to tolerate your own distress can lead to underfunctioning. Underfunctioners tend to believe that their thinking isn't as important or as effective as other people's, so the challenge for them is to trust themselves and not shut down when things get difficult. In a work environment where there are lots of underfunctioners, there may not be a lot of conflict, but there's not a lot of progress, either. Underfunctioners, said Kathleen, can practice taking a stand for their own thoughts and opinions, and taking a position on an issue when there might be pushback, instead of falling silent or avoiding.

Questions to Help You Develop a More Differentiated Self

The following reflection questions come from Dr. Kathleen Smith's book, *Everything Is(n't) Terrible*, where they appear in slightly different forms. Use them as an aid to begin developing a stronger, more differentiated self in the context of all your relationships.

Defining Your Self

[13] https://kathleensmith.net/2019/07/07/50-ways-youre-overfunctioning-for-others-and-dont-even-realize-it/

1. What are your core beliefs? What do you stand for?
2. What does good work look like to you? Being a good colleague?

Observing Your Own Thinking and Behavior
1. When do I adopt beliefs and values from others without doing my own thinking?
2. Where have my underdeveloped beliefs caused conflict or anxiety?
3. In what relationships is it really hard for me to think for myself or communicate my thinking? How can I develop my own principles?

Am I an Overfunctioner?
1. Do I rush in to solve problems, even if it's not my responsibility?
2. Do I prefer to "just get it done" my own way rather than taking the time to teach someone else?
3. In a meeting, do I speak carefully in case my colleagues get hurt feelings or anxiety, or soften someone else's statement if I can see they hurt a colleague's feelings?[14]

Am I an Underfunctioner?
1. Do I avoid stressful situations, hoping that someone else will dive in and fix things?
2. In a shared project, am I content to let another person drive and give them more credit for the end product?
3. Did anyone ever tell me, "You have great ideas; you just need to take more initiative!"

Planning for Change
1. What behaviors would I have to interrupt to become more differentiated?
2. What people would I need to work with and be with to practice defining myself? How would I do it?
3. How can I prepare for pushback and people's discomfort when I define myself?[15]

This is a lesson I'm still working on. Until recently I was entirely caught up in being reactive, because I didn't trust myself. Even though I had run my own business for over 10 years, I didn't listen to my own instincts or trust my own work product. Everything I produced, I ran by a staffer. I constantly jumped through hoops and pleased everyone else, because I was so scared of rejection. External accolades and money became the metrics by which I judged my success because that's what mattered to my family of origin and to me. A single negative comment from anyone could ruin my day. I avoided people I thought might be mad or disappointed in me. My emotions completely ruled my life.

[14] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/everything-isnt-terrible/201910/are-you-overfunctioner
[15] Smith, K. (2019). *Everything isn't terrible: Conquer your insecurities, interrupt your anxiety and finally calm down*. Hachette Books.

On the one hand, being so insecure helped me because I hired people who were smarter than me. I delegated often and had tremendous faith in my team. My radar to client or staff unhappiness became so attuned—always at an 11—that I created a workplace culture of overservicing clients. Our clients loved us, but we were all running on empty.

Although one of my mantras is “Always Consult Before Doing,” in this case I realized my desire to please others and not myself was limiting. So I decided to get curious about what a more differentiated response would look like. How could I better tolerate the anxiety I felt over the quality of my own work, and not rely so heavily on external reassurances?

Well, ironically, those external assurances gave me an excellent place to start: I could look back on years of successes, great and small, and remind myself that they were real and trustworthy. It was my anxiety that was the unreliable narrator. From there, I began to practice evaluating my own work and speeches based on my criteria of quality—not others’. And do you know what? I liked what I saw, and it was far less exhausting—and far more efficient—not to involve so many others in evaluating the merits of my work. This doesn’t mean I won’t seek out feedback. But this technique has made for a far less anxious and more enjoyable work environment for me and for my colleagues.

When we can anchor into our core self, the birthplace of our values, the self that knows what a good work product is or not, we not only calm our personal anxiety, we become a more effective leader and a better teammate. This is why we need a differentiated self.

“The greatest strength, the greatest dignity, comes from the internal knowing of our own self-worth,” Jerry Colonna said. “That is the greatest source of risk. It’s the thing that gets attacked. It’s the place from which the warrior springs.” And you can’t get to the place from which the warrior springs, the place from which the most effective leaders are forged, without becoming a differentiated self. “I fail every day,” Jerry went on, “but I will get up tomorrow, and I will try again, regardless of what the external world thinks of me. It took me a long time to grow up in that way. I think that *that’s* the opportunity that leadership presents for us.”

The past will always be with us, and no one shows up to work a blank slate. But we have so much choice and agency in how our past continues to affect us. When we understand how our past created our current thinking and how we interact with the world, we can choose how we show up, and not just react to old patterns. Other people

are showing up loaded with their pasts, too. “Their pasts, just like yours, may inform their expectations of the present," says psychotherapist Carolyn Glass. A better understanding of you and your team’s past patterns and formative influences helps develop the crucial self-awareness you need to manage anxiety and be the leader you were meant to be.