

How to deal with anxiety and be a good leader in a time of crisis

COVID-19 has indeed upset the apple cart and navigating this highly stressful and uncertain situation is one that we all need help with. Just this week the Office of National Statistics have revealed that twice as many adults in Britain are reporting symptoms of depression compared with this time last year. Maddyness spoke with Amber Coster from Balpro to get some top tips and tricks to both being a good leader and how to deal with anxiety.

The Balance Project, or [Balpro](#) is the brainchild of [Amber Coster](#) who is its CEO and founder. Amber worked for 6.5 years at AppDynamics; having started in marketing she worked her way up to the regional COO role and during her tenure, the business went from a \$100M valuation to a \$3.7B acquisition in 4.5 years - breaking software records!

Her success both on personal and professional levels was huge and yet Amber was burned out, exhausted and mentally just needing a break. Refusing to give in, her body and mind took over and she had a mental breakdown in 2017. She explains that at rock bottom she made a promise to speak openly about her journey, knowing how tough it is to overcome, tragically how common it is to

experience.

Understandably, the experience stuck with her and Amber left AppDynamics in 2019 to start Balpro and to let companies and startups know that revenue/company growth does not have to come at the expense of the employees. That in fact there are things employers can do to maintain and support the wellness of the employees and themselves as C-suite executives, whilst growing the business. She's basically proving that mental health is critical to a successful working model.

In fact, it is looking at an 'outcome-based model' which allows employees the flexibility to manage their time more effectively and efficiently. There is nothing normal about living and working at home constantly, and most people have found challenges along the way. If you have family juggling children and work can be difficult. If you live in a shared house, sitting all day alone in your room is not ideal. Even if you have the best set up, being lonely and doing endless video calls makes you feel removed from the world somehow. There is no 'winning at lockdown'.

Amber stresses the importance of balancing business and life, explaining there must be flexibility in how and when we work. Sometimes you do just need to prioritize life for whatever reason, a sick child, a mental health day etc. So working more towards an outcome-based model of success allows people to work and do their hours when it suits them. "You have to trust your staff."

We broke down some of the things a good leader should do. If you are a leader who wants to be better, or new to leadership, this is for you. Sadly, there is never a handbook for leadership and people tend to make it up as they go along with varying degrees of success, however, Amber has given her insight into how you can motivate your staff and take care of yourself.

Here are Amber and Balpro's top 3 leadership tips during COVID-19 and beyond.

1. Get to know your employees. Do this slowly and with purpose. Have virtual coffees, ask about their lives, interests, goals etc. Learn what makes them tick. Recognize that people deal with crises differently. By getting to know your team you will understand the best way to both motivate and help them through the rough patches. No one is the same, some people need an extra push, others need to be pulled back, so take the time to know them and how to get the best from them whilst supporting them.

2. Outcomes over presence. Do you need them glued to their screens replying within a few minutes of every email, or do you need to give them clear objectives with delivery times and flexibility of when they work? Give them the freedom to deliver what you need when you need it and you will both feel good and be successful. When you focus on outcomes over presence, productivity and wellbeing increase.
3. As a leader you yourself need someone to offload on, you can not carry all the burden and its ok to realise that you might benefit from some external coaching independent to the business. (Even if it's just to vent!) The old "Keep Calm and Carry On" mantra is not enough here. Amber explains that we tend to carry on, but there's nothing calm about it. And there's a time limit to that. Your health is of paramount importance. Yes, you have to manage your team to success but you also need to make sure you are taken care of in order to keep that going. Leadership coaching is great for this.

As we know anxiety is something that a great many people suffer with, and that includes a low-level hum to full-blown panic attacks. The mental impact of COVID-19 is something we are all going to have to deal with for quite a while. This is not a situation anyone is comfortable with and it would be naive to think we can all just be ok when we go back to 'normal'. (Side note: We both hate the word 'normal')

The reality is this is affecting all of us in different ways and at different times and the truth is that we all have to be kinder to each other and ourselves and recognise that it is ok not to be ok.

Amber and Balpro's top tips for how to cope with anxiety:

1. Build your own 'self-care toolkit' yes that means you reading this, open your phone to your notes section and write down a list of 10-15 things that you can do to refuel and nourish you. Things that bring you joy and bring you back to feeling like yourself. These things can differ in length, it could be 5 minutes of meditation, cooking yourself your favourite meal, going for a walk, listening to a podcast, practising yoga, or even doing two minutes of your phone on airplane mode and breathing fully. The main thing to remember is that each is valid as the other irrespective of the time each takes. Hint: Be compassionate. When you are feeling overwhelmed, go pick one to do, you may even surprise yourself with the fact that you have already done one of those things that day and that awareness can bring you to calm knowing that you have already respected your thoughts and brought your attention back to the present. (Side note- meditation is the key to happiness in my opinion! Try it and

- you won't look back!)
2. Recognise that whilst this situation isn't exactly new and that yes we have been dealing with it for over 6 months, it is still stressful. To not know the outcome, the duration, the impact of COVID is still stressful. Be aware of this and give yourself a break. Acknowledge your feelings, name them, recognise them and then let them pass. Feelings are meant to flow through you, thoughts can be intrusive, but you can also choose how to direct them. Amber recommends the Elizabeth Day Podcast with Mo Gawdat, where it is pointed out succinctly that in fact "nothing has ever been certain". Although, yes we feel like life is more uncertain than normal, it's quite a relief to recognise that in actual fact nothing has ever been certain in life. So let's be understanding and caring to ourselves. Give each other leeway to find our own pathways, and if we stumble along the way or we see someone else stumbling, just help them up.
 3. It is important to remember back from the caveman era that our brains naturally overestimate things going wrong and underestimate how well we are at coping when things do. This is when we catastrophize. Intrusive thoughts creep into our minds with the dreaded question of 'what if?' Well, a good exercise is to think back to your most challenging moment, the one you never expected or that thing you thought you would never cope with, but you did! Reflect back on how well you dealt with that challenge, how you coped, what things you put in place. It probably wasn't easy, but you did it. YOU SURVIVED! The anxiety that comes with the thought of stuff going wrong, is often worse than the actuality of it going wrong. Everything will probably be fine, but believe me when I say you are stronger and more competent at handling setbacks than you think!

As an added bonus Amber is keen to share her favourite grounding technique. It can be done anywhere, at any time and is pretty self-explanatory, very simple and yet very effective!

Amber also wants to recommend the book *Untamed* by Glennon Doyle. I have just started reading it and I have to say it really illuminates the way in which we as adults have been made to conform to feeling and acting in certain ways, often ways that go against who we are at our very core. So far a very interesting read!

I hope that this article and Amber through Balpro have enlightened you all into believing that although the situation right now is tough, it is something that we will all get through and grow because of. I have to say that I believe kindness is a trait highly undervalued and COVID-19 is reminding us all that actually it's pretty important to both practice for ourselves and others. So to quote the most recent Cinderella film "you must always have the courage and be kind" at least Disney got that part right!

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