

# Relationship Quality Matters: LMX and Mental Health in the Workplace

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The National Institute of Mental Health has reported that approximately 51.5 million people in the U.S. experience some form of mental illness and that anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental illnesses, with 31.1% of Americans experiencing some form of anxiety disorder in their lives. In this case study, one of the most common discriminatory behaviors toward all minority groups, microaggression, is explored through the lens of leader-member exchange theory (LMX). LMX has been the foremost leadership theory used to understand the dynamics of mental illness in the workplace and how leaders interact and motivate those with disabilities or mental illness. The authors apply LMX to help leaders better understand their role in creating a more inclusive workplace.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this case study, one of the most common discriminatory behaviors toward all minority groups, microaggressions, is explored through the lens of leader-member exchange theory (LMX). LMX has been the foremost leadership theory used to understand the dynamics of mental illness in the workplace and how leaders interact with and motivate those with disabilities or mental illness. We apply LMX here to help

leaders better understand their role in creating a more inclusive workplace. Through the communication between a leader (Chris) and an organizational subordinate (Jo) experiencing Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD, see Casarella, 2021), the importance of the communication and how insidious and damaging microaggressions can be will be illustrated. The goal of case is to encourage discussion on improving communication between leaders and members, particularly with individuals struggling with mental health disabilities.

## **MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE**

Approximately 51.5 million people in the U.S. experience some form of mental illness (National Institute for Mental Health [NIMH], 2021). Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental illnesses, with 31.1% of Americans experiencing some form of anxiety disorder in their lives (NIMH, 2021). According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in the years 2001–2003, 19.1% of adults in the U.S. experienced a form of anxiety disorder, with the reporting being higher among women (23.4%) than men (14.3%) (NIMH, 2021). Individuals with anxiety disorders often go undiagnosed and untreated. Approximately only 37% of those with an anxiety disorder are treated (ACCESS Community Health Network, 2021). Even without treatment, those with anxiety disorders may still function well in the workplace except during those times when they are experiencing severe, or debilitating, symptoms.

A mental illness diagnosis, like a generalized anxiety disorder, changes how a person moves through the world (Rose & Thornicroft, 2011). It is usual for individuals to, at times, feel worried or concerned about something in their lives. However, according to the DSM-IV and DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, volumes 4 and 5), an anxiety disorder is when an individual is experiencing extreme and overwhelming feelings of worry and anxiety over time, with impacts on sleep, muscle tension, concentration, fatigue, or restlessness (Substance and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, agoraphobia, separation anxiety, selective mutism (i.e., children who will not speak in public), and medication-induced anxiety disorder (Anxiety disorders, 2020).

In this case study, we will focus primarily on mental illness in the workplace and how such individuals experience ableism, or the belief that there is a perfect version of what a human should be, one who is “able.” *Ableism* has been defined as

*a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical*

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