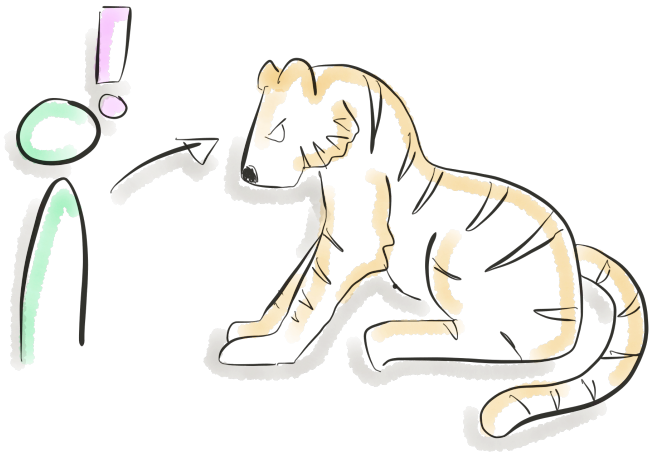
Where's the Tiger?



Understanding and Managing Anxiety

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Introduction

Anxiety is normal, even when it doesn't seem that way. That is the first and most important message of this booklet.

Most of us have an understanding that a certain level of anxiety is normal and reasonable (we might expect to get nervous before a job interview, a presentation or when we are waiting for important news about our health or our future). However, sometimes our anxiety might be really intense, it might happen in situations that don't seem to warrant it, or it might be something we just can't shake off, no matter how hard we try.

When our anxiety seems mysterious, inexplicable or unreasonable, it can be confusing, frustrating and can even make us feel like we are "failing," or that we are "weak" or "broken" in some way. It can leave us feeling powerless or lost, not knowing what to do.

The most important aim of this book is to break down exactly why we experience anxiety and why it always makes sense, even when it doesn't seem like it. The intention is to make anxiety less mysterious, help you feel like perhaps you aren't being strange for experiencing it, and to give you some options about how to deal with it.

Let's start with clarifying how the term "anxiety" will be used here. We all use the term "anxiety" slightly differently, because we all have our own experiences and understanding of what happens for us as individuals.

In this booklet, we are going to use the word "anxiety" to describe and explain the physical response our bodies have when faced with some form of danger (even when it doesn't seem like there is any danger present). Sometimes this response is at a low level (such as a little bit of nerves) and sometimes the response is incredibly strong (such as a full-blown panic attack). These can feel completely different to one another, but they are actually part of the exact same mechanism: the anxiety response. The difference is in the intensity and longevity of it.

We will start by talking about the anxiety response: how it works and why it happens.

Understanding the Anxiety Response

Why do we get anxious in the first place?

We like to think of ourselves as reasonable, rational beings, who see the world as it is. So when we are having an anxiety response to something that doesn't seem "reasonable" or which we can't understand, it can make us feel like we are being completely "irrational."

However, brains are not supposed to be reasonable and rational. Yes, it is nice and it is useful to be able to think clearly and to be able to do maths, but these things are nowhere near the main priority.

Our brain's first priority is to keep us alive.

In order to keep us alive, it has to be able to spot danger and react very quickly to it. That is what the anxiety process is for.

Actively scanning for danger

Let's take an example. If you walked into a large room and you saw some tables, some chairs, a stage, a tiger, some bottles of water and some pens, one of those pieces of information needs to stand out to you more quickly than the others.

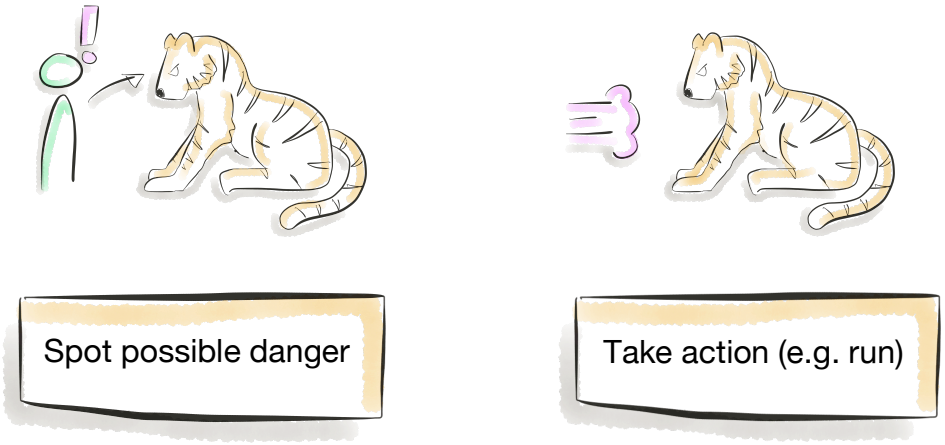
Brains don't treat all pieces of information the same. Brains are bombarded by so many pieces of information all of the time, and in order to keep us safe, they have to quickly filter out what is important and what is not. That means it is actively paying more attention to certain things and actively ignoring others.

We like to think of ourselves as beings who see the world as it is, but we don't. Could you, right now, name all the items in the last cupboard you opened? Could you tell me what socks you wore this time last week? Could you tell me how many red cars you saw the last time you went out somewhere?

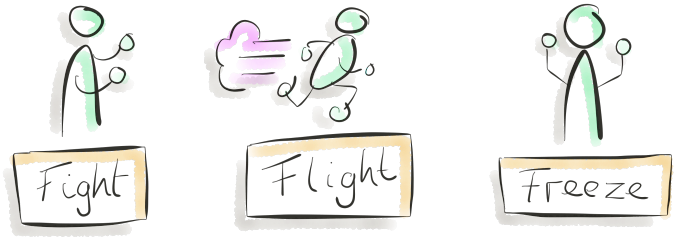
This is all information that has been taken in by your brain, but it hasn't held on to it. Not because you are unreasonable and irrational, but because it just doesn't serve a purpose. If your brain paid equal attention to everything and held on to everything, it would be impossible to function.

A functional brain is actively scanning for danger, so that it can get us ready to respond. That is what the anxiety response is for. The anxiety response is often referred to as the fight-or-flight response, because it gets us ready to run away, fight, or possibly freeze. Here's a bit of a summary:

Brains are set up to:



The action we take will usually be one of these three options:



Jumping ahead

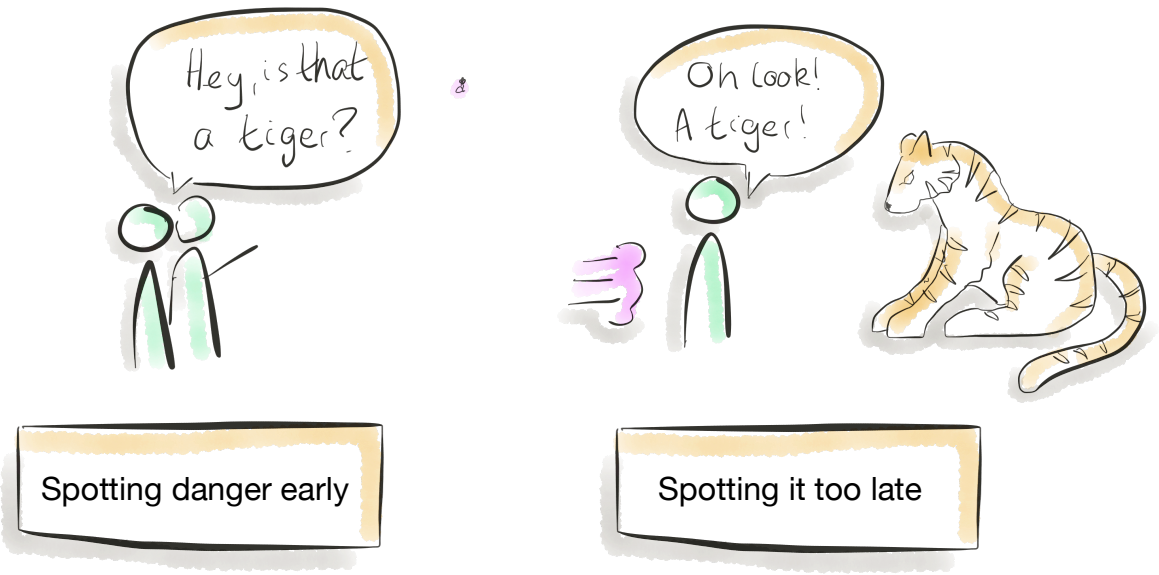
It is not good enough for a brain only react to danger when the danger is right in front of us. By then it would be too late. A functional brain is actually jumping ahead, looking out for the possibility of danger, so we can react before it is too late.

If you were walking through the jungle and someone had told you there were tigers lurking somewhere, you might flinch when a twig snaps. You might freeze and say "what was that?" when you see a flash of orange.

A functional brain is not interested in hanging about to see what happens. A functional brain would rather overreact.

When a balloon pops behind us, we don't take our time to work out what is going on, we immediately flinch and our hearts pound. That is this survival mechanism in operation. Most animals share this system with us. If there is a group of pigeons on the ground and one of them flies away in a panic, the other pigeons don't just hang about to see what is happening. They fly away too.

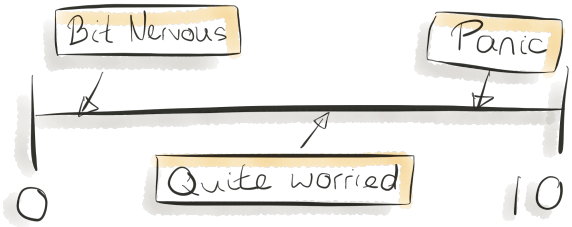
For our brains, constantly assuming everything is fine is no good. It is better to act first, think later.



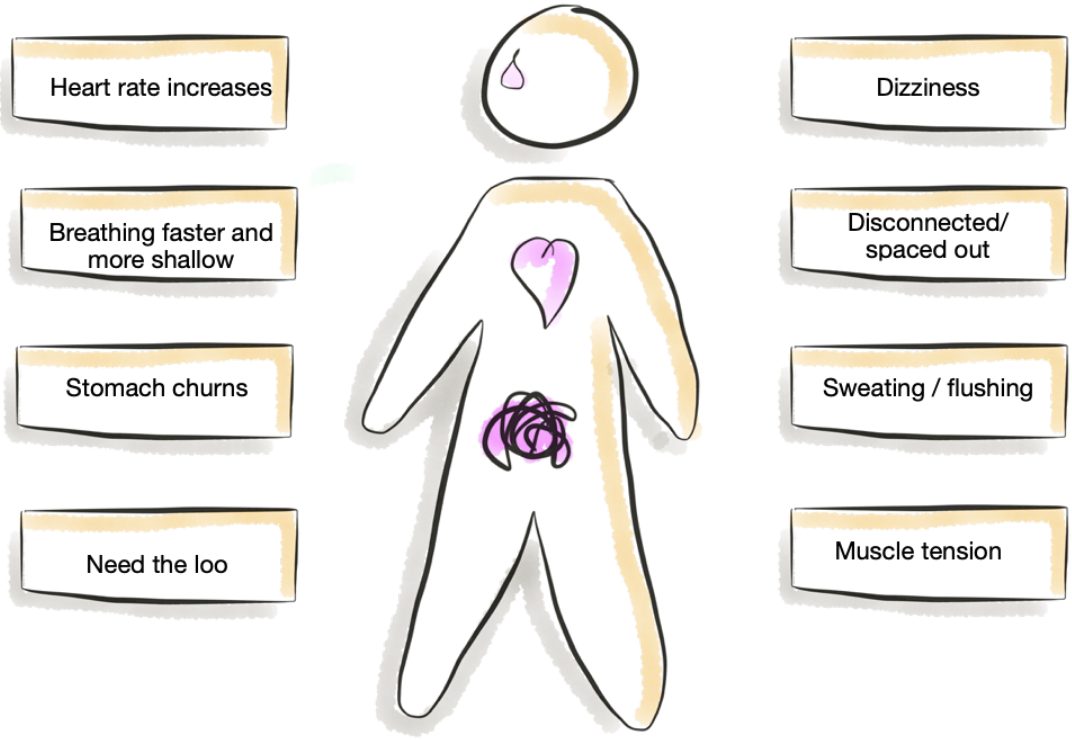
The Physical Response

When the brain spots a threat, it prepares the body for serious physical action. That means getting more oxygen into the bloodstream and pushing that oxygen to the muscles as fast as possible. Muscles tense up, ready to spring into action, sometimes leading to aches and pains if they stay that way. The stomach and digestive system are affected. You start to sweat. Your thinking becomes narrow. When there is a tiger in the room, you don't need to be able to do philosophy or maths - you just need to be able to see the tiger and the exit.

When the anxiety response is at a low level, these might be mild, but when the response is hitting the higher levels, you can really feel your heart pounding, feel like you can't breathe, and you might start to get other symptoms such as dizziness or even a sense of being disconnected or "spaced out."



This response might be a little bit of nerves, through to full-blown panic. It is still the same response, just dialled up to the max. Here is a summary of some of the main symptoms:



Where's the Tiger?

Fair enough, we get anxious when there is a tiger in the room, or even the possibility of a tiger in the room. However, that doesn't explain why we get anxious about things that seem less obvious. Most of us would get nervous about going for a job interview, but unless it is a zookeeping position, it is very unlikely that there will be a tiger involved.

In order for us to understand what is going on here, it is helpful to understand that it is not only tigers that our brains are on the lookout for. Brains are on the lookout for three major types of danger:

Harm to us or our gang:
- Attacks
- Injuries or accidents
- Health issues

Threats to our resources:
- Money
- Food
- Shelter

Losing our place in the group:
- Rejection
- Humiliation

Harm

We have an inbuilt desire to avoid harm, death or pain. Predators or attackers are not the only things that can cause those things for us. Injuries or health issues are also possible threats.

Resources

We need food, warmth and shelter in order to live, so anything that represents a threat to that - the idea of losing our job, for example - is scary.

Place in the group

We are not only animals, we are mammals who keep safe by being in a group. That means that the idea of doing something that might get me kicked out of the group is treated as a threat. The idea of being laughed at, humiliated or rejected is linked with an innate need to be accepted. If we aren't in the group, we don't have protection from tigers, and we don't have a particularly good chance of feeding ourselves.

Individual differences

We all get anxious about different things. There will be things that you get anxious about that other people don't. There will be things that others get anxious about that you are OK with.

This can be partially explained by the fact that we are all born with different natures - some of us are perhaps naturally more shy, for example. However, a big chunk can also be explained by the fact that no two people have had the same experiences.

Learning from Experience

In order to keep us alive, a functional brain learns from its experiences. We aren't born with all of our fears built-in. Instead, brains are set up to learn from what happens around them.

You are more likely to be afraid of dogs if you have been bitten by a dog before. You are more likely to be afraid of being laughed at if you have been laughed at before. You are more likely to think of money as something that is scarce and can disappear quickly if you have lived in a house where that was true.

The kinds of experiences that our brains will hang on to:

- Things that happen to us
- Things that people around us say and do

The factors which make an experience more likely to stick:

Intense emotion

- The scarier the event, the more likely that it will stick with us
- The more important the person is to us, the more likely it is that their words and actions will sink in

Repetition

- Messages that are repeated over and over are more likely to stick with us.

Vulnerability

- As children, we are in an impressionable state. We are still forming our impression of the world and of ourselves. Messages and experiences are more likely to stick with us.
- Being in an anxious or vulnerable state also makes messages more likely to stick. Moving to a new school or having some unrest and upheaval at home.
- There are other times in our lives when this is the case too, as adults: starting a new job, relocating, having a baby, periods of stress or loss.

When we can understand our anxiety in the context of the things we have experienced, it can start to make more sense. Maybe we are not over-sensitive or crazy. Maybe we have just had different experiences.

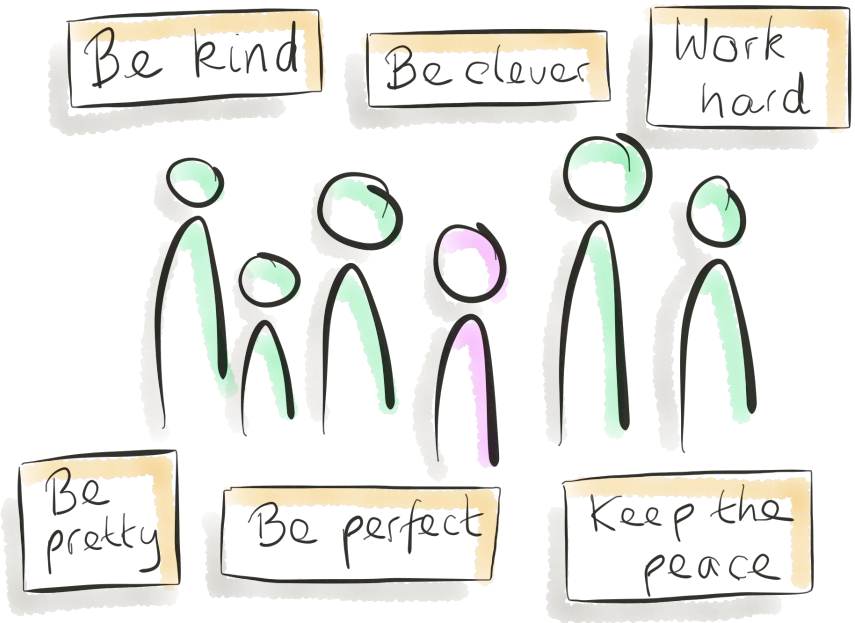
Learning our Place

Some anxiety can be best understood by thinking about what we have learned about our place in a group.

In a group of chimpanzees, one of them keeps his place in the group by being big, strong and tough. Want him to have a fight with someone? No problem. Want him to show that he is injured? No chance, that's way too scary. If he can't fulfil his role, he will get left behind. Another chimpanzee might have the role of picking out everybody's nits. As long as she can do that, she has a place, she has a function. But what if there are too many nits to pick? Or what if she hurts her hand and she can't do it any more? Or what if someone else comes along who is better at it?

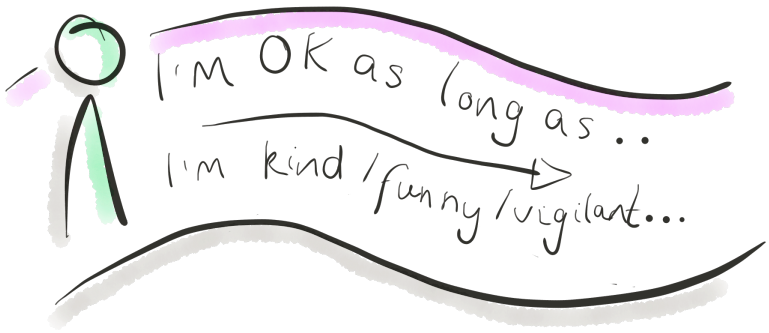
We each learn something different about what keeps us safe in a group. We learn that from our family environment and our social groups:

- What are the rules here?
- What is expected of me?
- What do I get praised for?
- What do I get criticised for?
- What do I get ridiculed for?



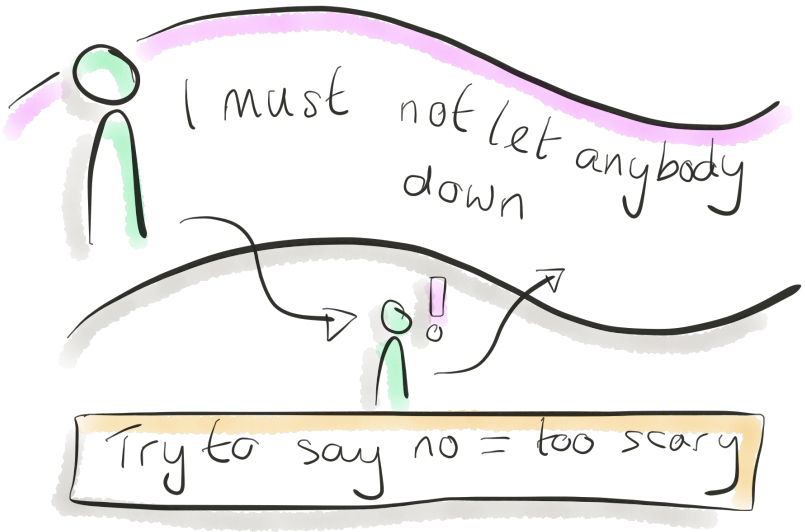
Our brains hold on to this information and it creates a set of expectations or rules. A path to follow in order to keep safe, to keep our place in the group,

“I will be OK as long as…”



As long as we can stick to the path, we feel OK. However, if we start to consider wandering off the path, that is when our brains will kick in with the anxiety response, which pushes us back towards our path of safety.

For example, if we have learned that we must always keep people happy and not let anybody down, we might find ourselves feeling anxious and uncomfortable if we need or want to say no to somebody.



The anxiety response is powerful. Saying no to someone might seem like a small thing, but in this example, to our brain, it represents the possibility of putting our place in the group at risk, of being rejected and cast out. Of being completely on our own.

This principle can help us understand why something seemingly small - being late, saying no to someone, leaving work without answering all of our emails, having a project to do, meeting up with people - can produce a lot of anxiety, and why something that one person gets anxious about, somebody else might be completely comfortable with (and vice versa).

It can also help us understand why we can end up being stuck, not being able to change our behaviour. We might be able to see that saying no would be good for us, but we feel to uncomfortable with it so we keep saying yes. We can see that we are overworking and it isn't useful, but the idea of leaving things unfinished makes us too physically uncomfortable, so we end up back on our emails in the evening.

When it comes to managing anxiety, understanding these learned expectations can be a big part of understanding what your anxiety is really about and finding a way to change things.

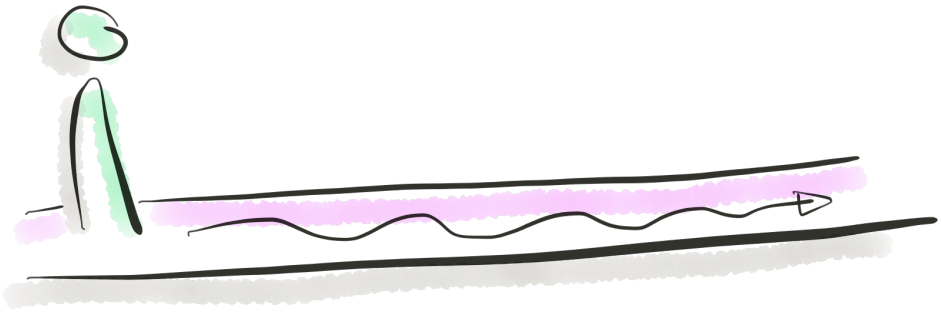
One key principle of breaking out of this "stuck" place with our expectations is that we are not aiming to get to a place where you have no expectations of yourself at all. It is useful to have some standards about how we treat people, or how we approach work or the world.

It isn't about removing expectations, it is just about trying to build some greater flexibility.

Flexibility

We all need some rules in order to function. It is beneficial for us to understand what helps and what doesn't. Following a particular set of expectations is not problematic in itself. For example, we all tend to understand that turning up to work in our PJs isn't going to be a great idea. We understand that it's not smart to walk in the middle of the road. These are rules which govern our behaviour but which are helpful and unlikely to cause us much of a problem.

Rules, expectations, paths to follow don't cause us problems in and of themselves. If they are reasonable and flexible, they help us to navigate the world. However, if the paths are too rigid or narrow, that is when they start to cause us problems.



Rigid, narrow path examples:

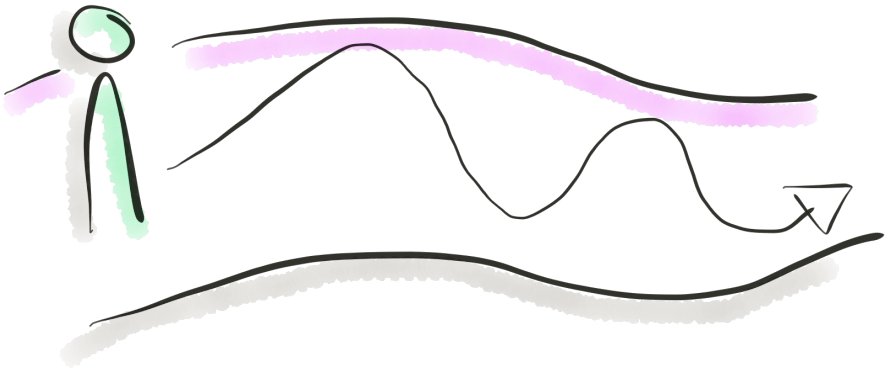
- "I must not make any mistakes at all."
- "I must never let anybody down, no matter what."
- "I must never say anything silly or stupid."
- "I must plan for every eventuality."

The harsher and more rigid the rule, the more likely it is to frequently cause us to feel stressed and anxious. The expectations are just too high, we can't meet them all the time. There is very little room for error, so we are constantly on edge.

Because the expectations are too high, it is actually inevitable that we will step outside the lines. Of course we sometimes say things we don't mean. Of course we make mistakes sometimes. Of course we can't get absolutely everything perfectly right. Of course people sometimes get upset with us, even if we are being as kind as we possibly can.

The more rigid the rule, the higher the expectations, the more likely we are to feel frequently on edge, and maybe even down about ourselves too.

However, if we can be more flexible, if we can make more space on the path, then perhaps we don't have to feel on edge quite so often.



Wide, flexible path examples:

- "It is good to try hard at important things, but mistakes are inevitable and acceptable."
- "It's good to care for other people, but it's OK to look after yourself too."
- "It's OK to want to fit in, but you won't say the right thing all the time and that is OK."
- "I can plan for some things, but some things are just not in my control."

If a rule is flexible and wide, it gives us greater choice. We can still have high standards if and when we want to, but we don't have to have them all the time. It might still be important to be to be kind and to be nice, but it is acceptable to sometimes put my needs first as well. I can make allowances for myself to sometimes say the wrong thing and not come down on myself like a ton of bricks.

Recognising what your rules and paths are is the starting point. Thinking about making things more flexible is the second step. The third is the hardest: actually practicing stepping outside the lines.

Practicing saying no, or prioritising yourself. Practicing leaving things unfinished or doing some things to "good enough" standard, rather than "perfect." Repeatedly trying it out until it doesn't make you so anxious any more.

The rest of this booklet is going to focus on what to do about your anxiety and broadly speaking, it follows that principle: understand it first, think about what you want instead, and practice doing it. If you want to understand how practicing doing things differently can lead you to a place where you feel less anxious overall, take a sneak peek at the "exposure and habituation" section further on in the booklet.

How to Manage Anxiety

Starting with Now: Our first port of call in dealing with any anxiety issue is understanding what is going on now, by practicing breaking it down what is happening into five sections, in this order:

Situation

What is going on? Where am I? Who is with me? What is the context and the build up? What day is it? What time is it? When did I start to feel the anxiety?

Interpretation / thoughts

What is going through my mind? What is it about this situation which makes me feel anxious, scared or worried? What am I worried will happen? What images are in my mind? What scenarios are running through my head?

Emotion

What words would I use to describe how I am feeling? Anxious? Worried? Are there any others in there e.g. guilty, angry or sad?

Physical

What is happening in my body? Any of that fight or flight stuff? Tension, churning stomach, hot, tight chest, headaches, fidgety?

Behaviour

What do I end up doing? How do I end up trying to make the anxiety go away? How do I deal with the way that I feel? Often these behaviours fall into two categories:

Fight: things we do to convince ourselves that there is no danger and that it will 100% be OK. Checking (emails, door handles etc), asking for reassurance, researching.

Run away: things we do to just make the anxiety go away. Distracting - scrolling, keeping busy, games, etc - avoiding people or places, drinking, smoking, eating.

Key Principles

It isn't all about the way you think. Sometimes it's the situation too.

The type and intensity of the emotion we feel is determined not only by the way we interpret things. It is driven by a combination of the situation we are in, and our interpretation of the situation.

For example, you might get a headache and have the interpretation "This might be something really serious" which would make you much more anxious than if it was "It's just a normal headache."

However, some situations are just very challenging and would make anybody feel anxious. Most people would find waiting for serious health results scary. You might find it more or less scary depending on your interpretation, but no matter what, you are likely to feel some anxiety. This means that it isn't always reasonable or possible to reduce your anxiety purely by trying to think about it differently.

Some things are inevitably scary or difficult and rather than trying to not be scared in the first place, it might be more helpful to work on being more accepting and kind to ourselves about the fact that we are feeling scared.

There is no such thing as an irrational thought

Sometimes, we can end up being really harsh with ourselves about the fact that we are anxious. It is important to remember that the way our brains interpret things is not illogical or irrational. The way our brains interpret things is a result of the experiences we have had. Being afraid of dogs is not irrational if we have had experiences which have shown us that dogs can be scary or dangerous.

The head-heart split

It is perfectly possible to have two conflicting "thoughts" in your head at the same time. We can feel afraid that something bad will happen, and also have part of our minds saying, "Don't be daft, it's going to be OK." This is sometimes called the head-heart split.

We have spoken about how brains are supposed to be actively looking for danger. This has its roots in the oldest part of our brains, and happens so quickly and automatically that we don't get a chance to get in there and stop it. However, we also have the capacity for cold, detached logic.

It is like having two parts of our minds speaking at the same time: the scared, animal part reacting based on experience, and a colder, calmer part of our minds that thinks of itself as "logical."

When it comes to trying to understand your anxiety, it is useful to be aware of this. When you sit down to try and work out what you are anxious about, you might have an answer, but the "logical" part might come in and say, "No, it can't be that, that's ridiculous." It is useful to acknowledge what the "logical" part is saying, but this is not the whole answer. It is the scared part of our minds that is driving the anxiety, so we want to know what that bit is saying.

Recognising emotions

Sometimes we can find it hard to recognise what we are feeling. Often we know something is "off" but we might not have the words for it or even really know what to look for. With anxiety in particular, sometimes you can be so used to feeling anxious that it has almost become like background noise, hard to notice.

If you find it hard to identify what you are feeling, there are two things you can do.

Prompts

The first is just having some prompts as a place to start, so that rather than asking a big open question like "How do I feel?" you can ask "Which of these options am I feeling a bit of?"

In your body

A second thing you can do is to start with the body. Rather than asking, “What emotion am I feeling?” You can ask, “What is going on my body?” and go from there. If it is tingles in your stomach or tension in your shoulders, maybe that means there is some anxiety going on. If you feel heavy, perhaps that is a “flat” feeling. If there is a lump in your throat, maybe that is sadness.

Spotting how you feel is often step number one

The reason it can be helpful to practice spotting physical and emotional reactions is that this is the first step to getting in there and spot our reactions early so we can do something about them.

Sometimes when we get anxious it is already at 7/10 before we even really realise what is happening, and it can be hard to bring it down from there. If we can learn how to spot the anxiety response when it is starting or at a low level, we have a chance of getting in there and slowing it down before it really gets going.

Practice paying attention to the feelings in your body, noticing the changes and the moments when you feel more anxious and less anxious.

Behaviour

When you get anxious, what do you end up doing? How do you react? What do you to get rid of the anxiety or make it go away? What happens? What impact does this behaviour have on the way you feel? Does it make you feel better or worse? For how long? These are some useful questions to start off with, just paying attention to what you do when you get anxious.

There is also a specific process to be on the lookout for: seeking certainty.

Seeking certainty

When we find ourselves trapped in a cycle of "overthinking" what we are usually describing is feeling on edge or anxious about something and going over and over it in our minds, or going backwards and forwards on a decision.

We are usually trying to find an "answer" or some certainty about how things are going to go. I can't quite fully relax until I know that everything is going to be OK. The problem is that with lots of things, I just can't reach a 100% answer, so my brain can't leave it alone. That is not purely a thought process. It is also a series of behaviours.

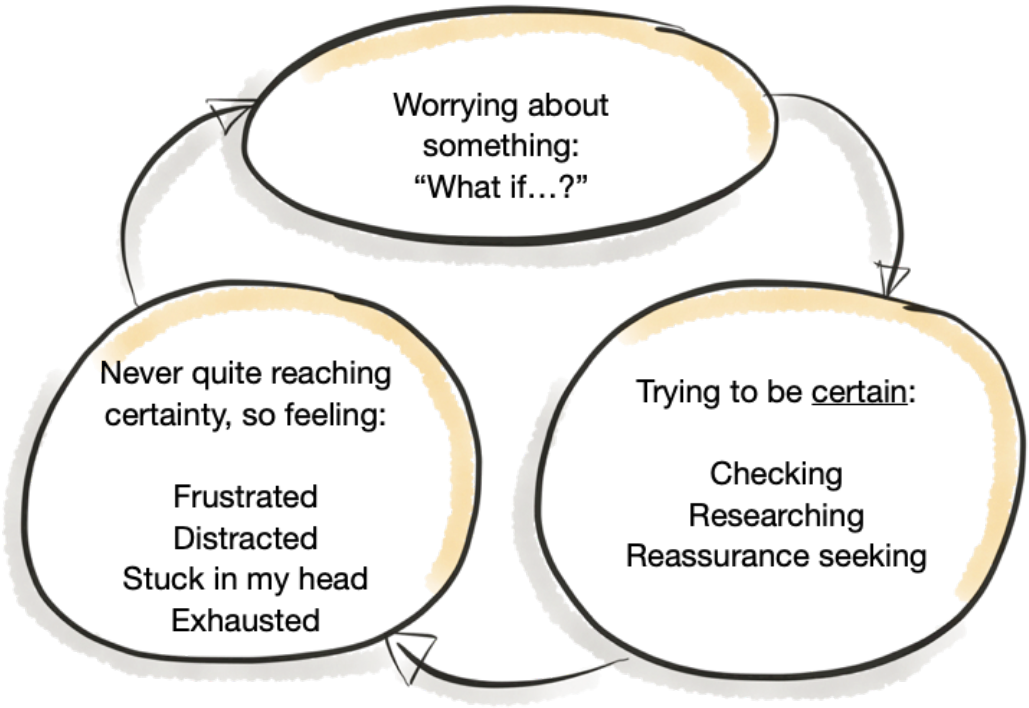
For example:

I can't decide what to wear to an event because I am concerned I don't look quite right, that I will be judged or not have a good time as a result. I keep asking my partner what they think but none of their answers really satisfy me. I keep landing on one option but then doubting it again later on.

I have messaged a friend to say no to something they asked me to do. They haven't replied so I am worried that they won't like how I said it or that they will be annoyed with me. I keep opening up my phone to check whether they have read it or been online, and re-reading my message to see if it comes across badly.

I am trying to book a hotel or a holiday but it is a lot of money and I don't want to make the wrong decision. I start reading reviews but before I know it I have spent half an hour doing so and I am no clearer than I was at the start.

The cycle we get stuck in is:



The outcome of this cycle is that we can end up spending a lot of time and energy on things that actually don't get us any closer to feeling 100% sure, because that just isn't possible. And, while we are busy checking, researching or asking for reassurance, we miss out on other things. It is hard to be present with our friends and family, for example.

Breaking out of this cycle first requires us to notice that we are in it. We are trying to get complete certainty where it is just not possible.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't do anything at all (it would be daft to never check up on symptoms that scare us), it just means that it is helpful to have a limit, so it doesn't end up dominating our lives.

This means coming to terms with and practicing living with a certain amount of uncertainty. If we can learn to put a limit on how much checking, reassurance or research we engage in, we can actually free up a lot of time and headspace.

I don't lose a whole afternoon deciding what to wear. I still feel uncomfortable and not 100% convinced, but I would still have felt that way after a few hours of trying them on again anyway.

I am still scared my friend is annoyed with me, but refreshing my phone every few minutes isn't helping that fear go away. I will have to sit with that discomfort for a while, and that might let me leave my phone alone for a bit.

Overthinking is not just about the way we think, it is about what we end up doing. Plus, it is easier to control how we act than it is to control how we think.

Here's a little more detail about the typical behaviours that can form part of this cycle:

"Solve" (trying to get rid of the anxiety by solving the problem or finding an answer):

Checking

To see if there is something to be worried about. For example: checking the door is locked if I am worried about burglars, checking my route if I am worried about being late, checking whether I still have my passport, checking my emails or messages.

Seeking reassurance

To see if someone else thinks this will be OK or if I should be worried. Asking if I should be worried about a physical symptom, if they think things will be OK, if I look alright, if they think my work is good enough, if I have worded things well in a message.

Researching

Reading reviews because I want to be sure I'm not making the wrong decision, using a search engine to see if I am right about a worry or a fear I have, reading about things going wrong so I can try to work out if that will happen to me.

All of these things are about trying to find an answer or a solution to something. Sometimes they give us a brief respite but shortly after, we might find ourselves feeling anxious and the cycle starts up again, so then we feel like we have to try to run away from the feeling instead.

"Avoid" behaviours (trying to get rid of the anxiety by hiding from it):

Avoiding things

Trying to avoid situations or triggers that make me anxious. Avoiding socialising, avoiding news or media about a particular subject that makes me anxious. Making excuses not to go to certain places or do certain things.

Distraction

Keeping my mind occupied. TV, scrolling social media, online shopping, working, cleaning, doing jobs, constantly listening podcasts or music so I can't think. Gaming, gambling.

Smothering

Doing something that physically dampens the way that I feel. That might be overeating, alcohol, drugs, anything that physically alters how I feel while I am doing it.

Avoidance behaviours help us feel less anxious in the moment, but they generally only last while we are successful in avoiding, which isn't always possible. Plus, the need to keep avoiding our thoughts and feelings can be exhausting, and it can end up really limiting our lives.

Making Changes

So far, we have mostly focused upon understanding what happens now, rather than how we can go about changing things. Before we get into the changes we can make, I want to just talk about why understanding what is happening now is an essential part of this process.

In the next section, we are going to talk about strategies to shift your thinking, to manage and slow down the anxiety response in your body, and the behaviours you can employ to reduce your anxiety overall.

However.

It's hard to use any of these strategies to change things unless you have worked on your awareness of what is going on now. It's hard to shift your thinking if you don't know what your thoughts are in the first place. It is hard to slow your body down effectively if you can't tell when it is speeding up.

That is why, before we work on what to do differently, we first work on your awareness.

You might notice that to begin with, it feels like hard work. You might sit down to try to break down what is going on into situation, thoughts, feelings, physical response and behaviours, but you have no flipping idea.

However, if you can take your time and really spend time practicing it, eventually it will become clearer. You will start to be able to notice patterns, and the day will come that you won't have to sit down with a pen and paper in order to work out what is happening. Instead, you will be able to go "Oh, hold on, I can feel some tension in my stomach here, I think that is because of that thing coming up tomorrow. I can see why I have been restless and fidgety, and why I have been on my phone so much."

Building awareness is not the step that we skip through to get to the good stuff. Building awareness is the foundation of everything else. Keep practicing.

In the meantime, let's talk about the things that can help when it comes to making changes. We are going to start with how to manage your thinking.

Thinking

If we can redirect the way that we are thinking, then that will affect the way we feel. That makes sense, right? For example:

“This is going to be a catastrophe.” = feeling anxious
“Everything is going to be OK.” = feeling calm

While this may make sense, it doesn’t necessarily help us. Sometimes, actually, knowing this does the opposite of help. We can see that the way we are thinking is not helping and that if we could think something different then we wouldn’t be as anxious, but we can’t help it. It’s automatic.

This brings us back to two ideas we have discussed:

There is no such thing as an irrational thought:

If your brain has flagged something up as dangerous, it is likely that it has done so because of previous experience. Brains are supposed to do that. The fact you are anxious might not be because you are being weird, but because your brain is working perfectly well.

The head/heart split:

It is perfectly possible to have two conflicting thoughts in your head at the same time, “I am afraid this is going to go really badly” and, “I am pretty sure it is going to be OK.” There is one part part of you that is scared and another part of you that can see the situation from the outside and that this is likely to be anxiety talking.

This is important to note when it comes to understanding that, while there are a few different ways of working with thinking, some will be more effective than others. It also brings us to our first rule of working with thoughts:

Before we start trying to change our thoughts, we first need to work on being accepting and kind towards ourselves and the thoughts we already have.

Rather than saying to ourselves, “This is pathetic, this is weak. This is stupid, ridiculous, irrational,” we might say something like:

“I am having these thoughts because I am a human being and that is what human beings do.”

Or

“I am having these thoughts because of my history. Other people might not understand it but that doesn’t make me a weirdo, it just makes me a person.”

Being kind and understanding about our thought processes really helps when we start to offer ourselves alternatives.

When it comes to doing something different with your thinking, the intention isn’t necessarily to completely eradicate the current thinking and the associated anxiety, but instead to be able to give yourself some flexibility in your thinking and your responses.

There are a few ways in to this:

- Compassion
- Attention
- Defusion

Compassion

If a small child is scared of something, explaining the cold, hard facts in order to try to tell them why they don’t need to be worried is not necessarily going to work. What a child needs in those moments is a soothing tone of voice, warmth and understanding. Someone to sit with them and speak to them kindly.

This is something we may be a bit rubbish at doing for ourselves. Sometimes we have developed the ability to see what we would say to someone else, but the bit we are missing is the tone of voice we would use. We might speak to ourselves more sharply, or with greater frustration. Luckily, speaking to ourselves in the way we would speak to others is something that we can learn.

Practice writing down your thoughts and then asking:

“If someone I love - a child, a friend - was in this situation and having these thoughts, what would I say to them, and what tone of voice would I use?”

To begin with, you might notice that you can only catch and change how you speak to yourself retrospectively - rather than being able to catch it in the moment. That is totally normal. The more you practice it, the closer you get to the day where an

anxious thought pops up, you can catch it there and then and offer yourself the compassion you normally reserve for everyone else.

Gentle questioning

It can be helpful to question or challenge your thinking sometimes, as long as you can practice doing so with a bit of that compassion we have spoken about.

Sometimes we start by asking ourselves whether the thought is “true” and what evidence we have to support it. This can be a useful principle, but sometimes it gets us tied up in knots. For example, if I think that a headache could be a sign of something much more serious, the question about whether or not this is true is a hard one to answer. I might be able to see that I am jumping ahead of myself, but if part of me is worried about it, I can’t really convince myself that there is no possibility that my anxious thoughts - that the headache might be a sign of something serious - is true.

A more useful question in these situations is: “What is this way of thinking doing for me?”

It is entirely reasonable to be concerned about our health and take precautions, but does spending a whole day indoors thinking about nothing else help me make any progress with it?

The question “What is this way of thinking doing for me?” Can be a very useful one, but again: only if we are asking it with kindness rather than judgement.

Attention

When we are anxious, often our minds are focusing on something in particular.

When we are worrying about something, our minds are off in the past, going over something that has already happened, or in the future, thinking about something that could happen but hasn’t yet. Either way, we aren’t focusing upon what is in front of us.

When we feel self-conscious, our attention can turn inward: “What am I going to say next? My mouth feels so dry. I am standing so awkwardly, what am I supposed to do with my hands?” This serves to intensify how awkward and uncomfortable we feel, and it also means we may feel distant, distracted, not really in the room.

Practicing noticing where your mind is putting all it's attention and - gently, kindly - bringing your focus back to what is going on in front of you can really help. Using your senses is a good way of doing this: What can I see around me? What can I feel? What can I hear? What can I smell or taste?

Defusion

This is a concept from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (or ACT - see The Happiness Trap by Russ Gilbert, for example) which is about recognising your thoughts as thoughts, and not the truth. An analogy used in ACT is thinking of thoughts as cars going by. Imagine being stood in the middle of a roundabout, watching cars go past. You don't have to flag them all down and climb inside, you can just watch them go by instead, if you want to.

You can apply this idea in a couple of different ways:

Labelling your thoughts as thoughts:

"I am going to mess this all up" becomes "I am having a thought that I am going to mess this all up"

Just recognising that this is a thought, not the truth, gives you a better chance of not getting dragged along by it.

Changing the tone of your thoughts:

This is really effective. You can change the tone of your thoughts by either singing them to a tune you like, or by putting your thoughts into a voice that you find amusing (Darth Vader or Homer Simpson, for example).

This doesn't change the content of the thought but it does change the tone, making it a little bit easier to see the thought for what it is - just a thought - and to not get carried along by it.

Managing the Physical Response

When we are anxious, everything goes faster. Your heart beats faster, your breathing is quicker and more shallow. A side-effect of this is that it becomes harder to think clearly. Often thoughts are racing or buzzing around, or you end up with tunnel vision.

If a tiger is in the room and your body is getting you ready to respond, you don't need to be able to do philosophy or maths. All you need to be able to do is see the tiger and the exit. There isn't space for anything else.

The anxiety response in your body can start to get in the way of being able to think clearly. So, if you can just slow the body down, it becomes that little bit easier to think, to get perspective and choose how you want to respond. Here are three ways of doing that:

Breathing

Pace

Posture

Breathing

If we could just slow our heart rate down just by thinking about it, that would do the trick. Alas, that skill is unavailable to us. However, we do have the ability to slow our breathing down and if we do that, the heart rate follows.

There are many breathing exercises out there, but the key principles are that when we are anxious, breathing is fast and shallow, but when we are relaxed, breathing is slow and deep. Relaxed breathing is what we are hoping to achieve, so here are some tips on what to aim for:

- Slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth. Think of the rhythm of someone is snoring.
- You are aiming to fill up your lungs completely. That means your diaphragm will drop right down, so you need to let your belly hang out to make room for that, rather than holding it tense and tight.
- When you breathe in, think about doing it so slowly enough that you can't really feel the air going in through your nostrils.
- When you breathe out, you can make a sound if you like.
- You really don't need to do this for half an hour if you don't have the time. Even 30 seconds will make a difference.

Sometimes you aren't in a position to do some deep breathing. If you are in a meeting or giving a presentation, you might want ways of slowing things down without having to say, "Hold up, let me just take a few moments to breathe."

So you can use these two options instead:

Pace

Slowing down the pace of your speech and your movements. When you are anxious, your speech and movements are fast. If you speak slowly and pause between your words, your breathing will slow down too. If you walk slowly or type slowly, your body can take the cue that it is OK to relax.

Posture

When you are anxious, your body wants to tense and curl up like a hedgehog:

- Looking down
- Tense shoulders
- Hunched over

So try out what it feels like when you take a much more relaxed posture:

- Shoulders back and down (open chest)
- Chin up, looking ahead
- Try to keep your limbs loosey goosey

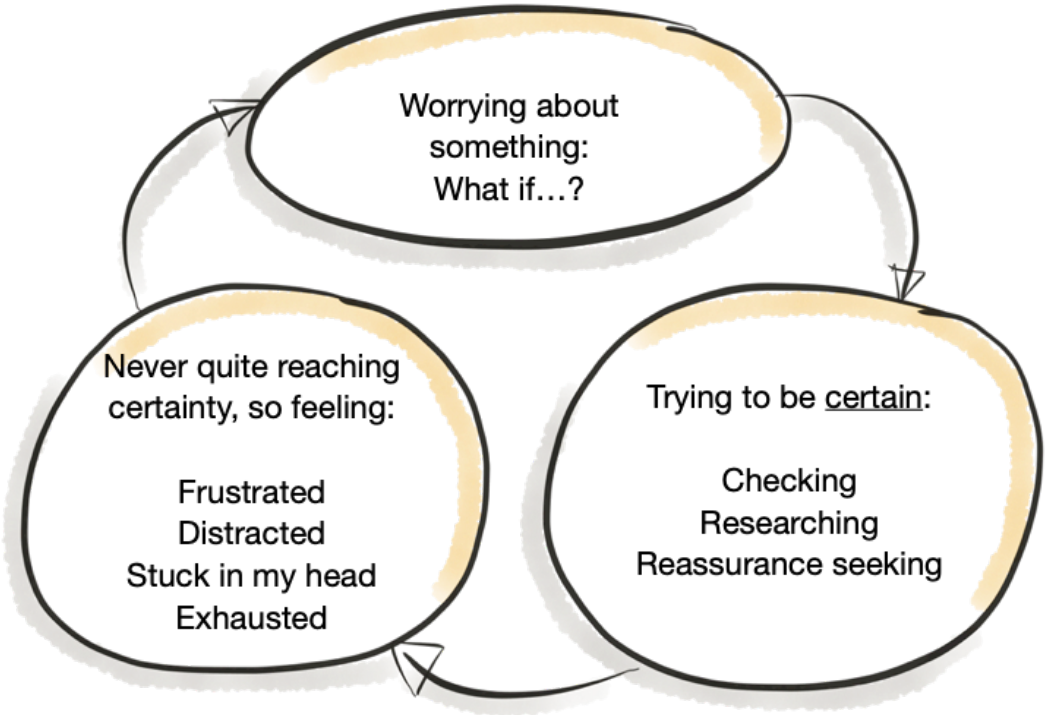
Using this posture also makes it easier to use the full capacity of your lungs.

These are some of the things that you can do to help slow your body down when you feel anxious. Next up, let's talk some more about behaviour: what helps and what doesn't.

Behaviour

We discussed earlier a key concept in dealing with anxiety: sometimes our behaviours can keep the problem going, or become an issue in themselves. This is particularly true when our behaviours are focused upon trying to seek certainty in a situation where certainty is just not possible to achieve.

It leaves us stuck in a cycle:



When it comes to breaking out of this cycle, behaviour is the simplest place to start. If we can practice being OK with some uncertainty, or living with some fear, we don't have to live such a restricted life. This is something we can practice and get good at. We can learn to become more comfortable with uncertainty, imperfection or with any other things that make us anxious.

There are two ways of understanding and trying this out. First up: exposure and habituation.

Exposure and habituation

This is the most commonly recommended approach for tackling most forms of anxiety, from a full-blown phobia - such as heights - to those buzzing worries about anything and everything. This approach is based on the principle that if you can repeatedly face the thing you are afraid of, the anxiety it provokes will reduce.

You might already have some experience of this. Noticing that the first day of a new school or workplace is really scary, but day 100 is not - as long as nothing has gone majorly wrong. The first night spent away from home can be scary for lots of kids, but with repetition it gets easier.

Let's talk a little more about how this process works.

Habituation

When our anxiety rises and makes us uncomfortable, it is natural that we do something to try to push it back down again, get rid of it or hide from it. For example:

- "I think about going to a social event and it makes me anxious, so I decide not to go and my anxiety drops."
- "I am worried about not doing a good enough job on a presentation, so I read through my slides again. It makes me feel a little bit better initially, but it doesn't last long and a little while later I have to read them again."
- "I am tense about work, so I have a sneak peek at my emails and there aren't any new ones. I feel relief for a while, until the thought comes back again later in the evening."

Each of these are examples of the same pattern: The level of anxiety rises and we do something to make it go down again. This works in the short term because our anxiety reduces.

However, the next time the same thing comes up - whether it is a few minutes later or a few days later - we will get the same level of anxiety, and we have to do the same set of behaviours again. Ultimately, nothing changes and we are stuck repeating the pattern.

Here's a diagram to show this process visually:

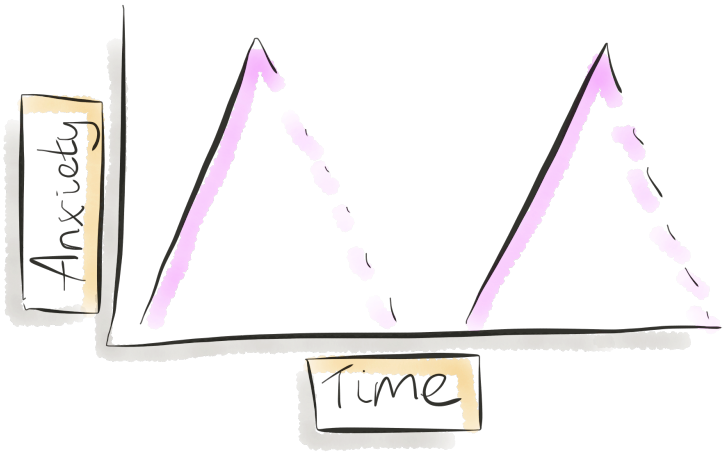


Fig: what happens when the anxiety level rises and we shut it down or run away: it works in the moment, but leaves us repeating the same pattern over and over.

What if, instead of shutting the anxiety down, you just sat with it? Instead of avoiding heights, you purposefully climbed up a ladder. If you were anxious about work and wanted to check our emails, instead you didn't do anything, but just sat with the uncomfortable feeling and let it be. What would happen then?

It can feel like the anxiety will just keep building and building, that it will skyrocket. However, actually, it probably will rise, but will ultimately reach a peak and will plateau. It will remain at a high level for a while, and then start dropping, gradually.

It will look something a little more like this:

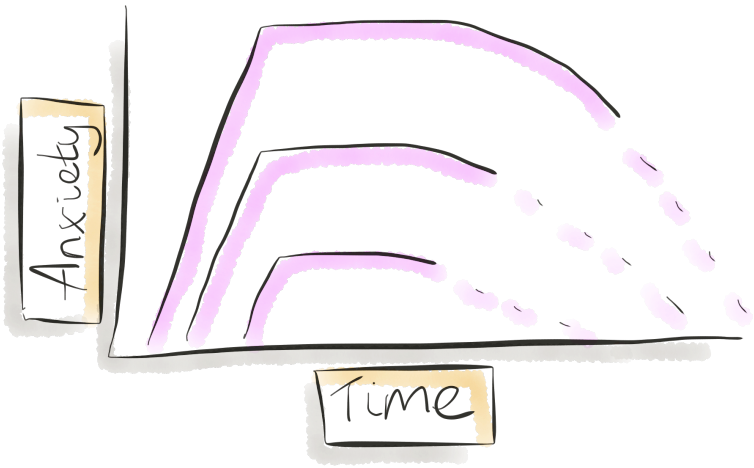


Fig: what happens when we sit with the anxiety instead of shutting it down: the anxiety stays high for a while and gradually comes down on it's own. If we repeat this process, eventually we get used to it, we no longer perceive this issue as a threat like we used to.

This pattern reflects your brain initially setting off a crisis alert, and then calming things down when it starts to recognise that nothing catastrophic has happened:

“Crisis alert, we are in danger, we are in danger, we are in danger! …Hold on, why hasn’t anything happened? Careful, it could still be coming…It still hasn’t happened, what’s going on? …Maybe we aren’t in danger. Let’s calm it down now everybody, but still be on the lookout…OK, still nothing has happened. Maybe we are OK. Stand down, everybody, stand down.”

This process is called **habituation**: getting used to something, finding that it is OK.

The first few times, your anxiety will be really high and it might take a while to start to drop. However, if you are then able to repeat that process, over and over again, the day will come where the initial level of anxiety just isn’t as high. Your brain no longer recognises this thing as quite the threat it previously did. If you continue to do that, this process carries on. It might never get to zero, but you can get to a point where the level of anxiety generated is much more manageable, or maybe even just not much of a reaction at all.

Graded exposure

The process of putting yourself in situations so that you can become habituated to them is called **graded exposure**.

One of the reasons this approach is so important in the treatment of any anxiety issue is that it is firmly based on the principle that you can talk to yourself all you like and still not succeed in calming yourself down, because anxiety is an automatic, unconscious, animal response.

If a dog has been mistreated by humans before and is introduced to a new, kind human, it will initially be very afraid. Explaining to the dog in cold, logical words that this new human is different won’t make any difference at all. However, if the dog can stay, if it can be around this new human for long enough, it will eventually feel safer in their company.

That is what we are doing with graded exposure: we are taking the part of you that learned that this particular thing was scary - probably at quite a young age - by the hand, and gently showing them that it isn’t as dangerous as it seems. We aren’t going to do it in a harsh or overwhelming way. We are going to take it step by step. Let’s talk about how.

Step 1: Knowing where you want to get to

Graded exposure can be uncomfortable, so it is important for there to be a good reason for doing it. Start with an aim that really means something to you. Something that will make a difference to you. Why do you want to work on this anxiety? How does the anxiety get in your way? What would you like to be able to do differently if you did not feel so anxious? Some examples:

It might be about something you want to do more of:

- "Introducing myself at a work function and hold a conversation with someone I don't know for a few minutes, without being mega anxious."
- "Driving an hour away from home, on my own, feeling reasonably calm."
- "Saying no to people at work and in my personal life, without being a nervous wreck for the rest of the day."

Or it might be about things you want to do less of, to make more space for life:

- "Turning my computer off at the end of the working day and not check my emails all evening."
- "Choosing a place to eat within 30 minutes, only looking at the star ratings and a couple of reviews, rather than reading every review there is."
- "Checking the doors and windows once before bed, rather than five times."
- "Tolerating some imperfection in the house, leaving some things unfinished or leaving the tidying for another time, so I can spend a little more time with my family."

Step 2: Laying out some steps

Once you know where you want to get to, it is more effective to take one small step forward at a time, rather than aiming for one big leap. For example: If you want to tackle a fear of heights, you don't start at the top of the ladder, you start with the rung that starts to make you feel a little uncomfortable. Once you can handle that, then you can try the next rung up. If your difficulty is saying "no" to people, don't start with the scariest person you can think of, start small. If you are aiming to reduce checking from five times to one time, start by trying four times and sitting with that.

You really can make these steps as small as you like. There are no rules about pushing yourself super-fast here. In fact, the more you can be honest with yourself and allow yourself to take it at a pace that feels OK to you, the more likely you are to actually be able to make some progress.

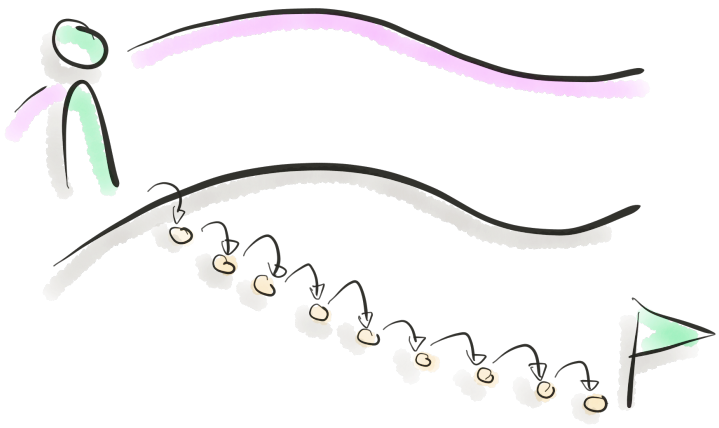


Fig: Teeny tiny steps. One at a time.

Step 3: Giving it a go

When it is time to get started, there are four principles to bear in mind.

Graded: take it step by step, and go easy on yourself. It is most effective when you allow yourself to take a small step forward and spend time getting more comfortable with that, before you gradually dial it up and take another step.

Prolonged: when you face something which makes you anxious, try to stay there and sit with the anxiety for long enough for you to feel it starting to come back down. You don't have to stay until the anxiety drops completely, just enough to feel it coming down.

Repeated: the general idea is that the more you repeat something, the faster you will start seeing your overall anxiety starting to drop. If you can manage three times a week or more, you are giving yourself a good chance.

Without distraction: if you face some anxiety but you end up distracting yourself rather than really feeling the anxiety come up and down again like a wave, you might not get the improvement you are looking for.

Graded exposure can be really effective for reducing anxiety and making things much easier to face. However, even if you do a lot of really great exposure work, you are unlikely to eradicate anxiety completely, because that just isn't how it works. If there is always going to be some anxiety, what are you supposed to do with the bit that remains?

Acceptance

No matter how much exposure work you do, there are some things that will always make you a bit anxious.

Maybe because the roots of the anxiety are so deep-seated and old, or maybe because you are a human being and that's just how human beings work. This can be hard to accept, because feeling anxious is horrible.

It makes sense that we might wish that we could be completely free of anxiety. We would all find it easier to relax on an evening if there was no anxiety whatsoever. We would all find it easier to socialise with our friends if there weren't niggling worries whirring away in the background. It's really not fun having anxiety hanging about while you are trying to engage with something else. It can be strong, it can be loud, it can be powerful. Of course we would rather be rid of it.

However, if the anxiety is not actually going to go away, but we spend a lot of time trying to get rid of it, wish it away or avoid it, it leaves us in a position where it isn't the anxiety itself which is causing the problem. Instead, it is our reaction to the anxiety that is causing the problem.

What if, instead of spending time and energy trying to eradicate it, we were able to work on tolerating the fact that it is there? To practice speaking to ourselves with kindness and compassion about the fact the anxiety is there, and to practice living the life we want to live even though anxiety is still there in the background?

If we can work on this, then it means that even when the anxiety is present, we can still go and see friends, we can still steer clear of emails in the evening, we can still go and do some exercise, we can still listen to music, we can still eat something we really like.

Anxiety can take some of the joy, peace or enjoyment from our activities, yes. But we will still have a better time trying to do the things that mean something to us than if we spend all our time trying to get rid of something or run away from something that we can't actually outrun.

That's the purpose of working on acceptance. Here are some tips on how to actually practice this.

1. Acknowledging the anxiety and hearing it out

Spending all day trying to squash, run away from, or avoid our anxiety is similar to trying to block out a person who is trying urgently to get our attention. We can push them out of the room, close the door and hold the door closed. That might work to some degree, but we still know they are there and we can still hear them. It takes a lot of energy to hold that door closed, and the moment we try to rest, relax or go to sleep, we let go of the door and they can get in again.

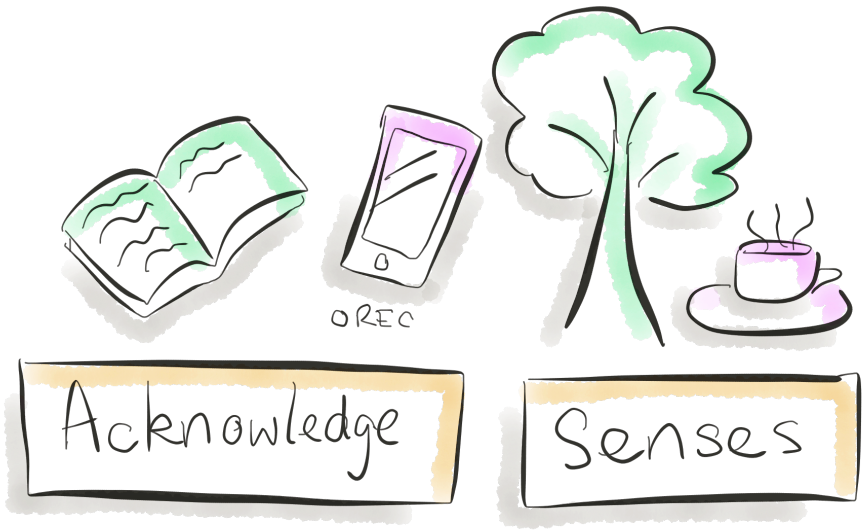
Actually, it can be helpful sometimes to just let our anxiety have it's say. Let the person in, let them tell you what they needed to tell you until they have said it all.

The way we can do this is acknowledging the anxiety and letting yourself feel it fully for a few moments. Feeling the anxiety come up and subside like a wave - which it will do.

One impactful way of doing this is unstructured writing. Sitting down with a piece of paper and a pen and writing your worries, completely unfiltered. Not a structured piece of writing or a to-do-list, the point is to feel it and just blurt it all out. That means writing without stopping and without thinking much. Not really letting your pen leave the page and not going back to correct your grammar or punctuation. Instead, get straight into it with "Right now I feel anxious / worried / upset about…" letting yourself feel the anxiety as much as you can and just keeping it going until there is no more to say.

This approach can be particularly helpful if you notice that your anxiety gets in the way of your sleep, either preventing you from getting to sleep or waking you up at 3 a.m. Spending some time before bed blurting your worries out onto the page can help.

Don't like writing? You could try a voice note to yourself instead.



2. Using your senses

When anxiety is rumbling away in the background, it can be hard to relax or be present in the room. Our minds keep drifting back to the worries and it can be hard to wrestle our attention back to the present just with concentration and mind power alone. Sometimes we need a little bit of help to be present. One way of doing that is to use our senses.

Movement

You may have noticed that sometimes it is easier to have good conversations with people when you are walking together. One part of this is that walking or other physical activity gives you just enough physical sensation to make it a little bit easier for you to be present. You can feel your feet on the ground, feel your arms moving.

It doesn't have to be walking. You can also use stretching, bending, flexing your fingers, rolling your neck. Taking a deep breath. All of these things make it that little bit easier to feel your body, to come back to the present.

Temperature

Getting outside in the fresh air for a minute or two, running your hands under cold water, holding an ice cube, feeling the warmth of a shower or a hot cup of coffee. Hot or cold temperatures are excellent for giving you something to remind you where you are, to make it that little bit easier to be present.

Body position

If you have been working in a sitting position all day, when it comes to trying to unwind or relax, try shifting your body position. Try lying down on the floor and looking at the ceiling, or standing and pacing. Something different to how you have been for most of the day, giving your body a big cue.

Sound:

Sometimes it can be helpful to have a little bit of noise. Leaves rustling, birds, traffic, people. You can also use music. The sweet spot with this one is: enough noise to allow you to keep one foot in the present and not be dragged off with your worries, but not so much that you can't think at all. Sometimes music without lyrics can be great for this, or music you know so well that it can stay in the background.

Taste and smell:

When we are anxious, sometimes we can find ourselves eating or drinking things without even really noticing them. The coffee disappears without us really tasting it. A good exercise to try out is making yourself a drink or something to eat and then spending five minutes paying attention to how it smells, how it feels and how it tastes.

Final Thoughts

There are so many ways of trying to manage or deal with anxiety, but for me, the single most important thing I would want you to take away from this is the understanding that your anxiety is not a flaw in you. It is not you being weak, or unreasonable, or irrational.

We most often get stuck with our anxiety when we are expecting too much, when we are being unfair to ourselves. If we can learn to be more accepting of ourselves and the way that we feel, we don't have to fight it so much.

I also want to make it clear that if you find that reading this booklet and trying to apply the things from it does not work for you or get you where you want to be, that isn't failing. It might just not be the right thing, or be quite enough.

The analogy I would use is reading a booklet on back pain and following it's advice might not completely solve your back issue. That might not be because you haven't understood it well enough or haven't applied it well enough. It might be that the problem is bigger than a leaflet can successfully deal with, or it might be that there is something missing, something not quite covered in the information. Something a specialist might be able to help you find or understand. It is OK to want or need some help. There is no rule that says you have to do it all on your own.

So, the main thing I want to leave you with is this:

No matter what level of anxiety you are dealing with, and no matter what the anxiety is about, the first thing to work on is being kind and reasonable to yourself about the fact that it happens. It doesn't make you a weirdo. It makes you a human being.

I really appreciate you taking the time to read this booklet. If you do get something from it or you do try some of these things out, let me know how you get on.

Take care of yourself

Ted Bradshaw @cbtted