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To my mentors: Michael Tompkins, whose brilliant guidance helped me to build my foundation in CBT; Christine Padesky, whose wisdom and clear voice has helped me to find my own; and Jacqueline Persons, who always helps me see the big picture.



## Introduction

# You Are Not Alone and You Are Not to Blame

**T**eens who suffer from anxiety often think of themselves as weak, stupid, or any of many other negative labels. You may think you are the only one who feels things this way and that everyone else is normal.

The thing is, normal doesn't exist. Everyone feels anxiety, and in a surprising variety of situations. Some feel it in a crowded cafeteria, others in an empty hall. Many people panic giving an oral report while others feel panic at random times for no apparent reason. The star quarterback who shouts audibles loud enough to be heard above the roaring crowd may get so anxious around the girl he's attracted to that he is unable to string two words together. Depending on the situation, almost everyone can feel overwhelmed with anxiety.

There are anxious teens all around you. Studies show that anxiety is the most common mental health problem in America, affecting nearly one in five people. If you are sitting in a classroom of thirty students, chances are that at least a row of you are suffering from one of the seven most common varieties of anxiety: social anxiety, generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, specific phobias, panic, and agoraphobia. The reason you are unaware of your anxious peers is that they are just as good at hiding their anxiety as you are.

You are not alone, and you are also not to blame. Scientists who study DNA have isolated a number of genes associated with heightened or lowered sensitivity to danger, including genes that have been nicknamed the "warrior/worrier gene" and the "risk-taking gene." Your present level of anxiety is partially inherited. In fact, if you have a parent or sibling with an anxiety disorder you are four times as likely to suffer from anxiety yourself.

In addition to your genetic makeup, your level of anxiety can be influenced by a traumatic life experience or your parents' anxious behavior. So blaming yourself for your anxiety makes about as much sense as blaming yourself for the color of your

eyes, things that have happened to you, or the family you were born into. You can't change your genetics, your life experience, or your parents. These are the cards you were dealt. But will you have to suffer with anxiety for the rest of your life, missing out on things you want to do? Are millions of anxious teens predestined to become anxious adults? Absolutely not! You *can* learn how to manage your anxiety, so that you can do the things that are important to you. This book will show you how.

Here is a brief overview of the different types of anxiety this book addresses. You can also download a brief quiz that will help you identify which types of anxiety you suffer from at <http://www.newharbinger.com/32431>. (See the very back of this book for more information about downloads.) Don't be surprised if there is more than one; that's very common. Later chapters in this book will focus in more detail on how to deal with your specific types of anxiety.

### Generalized Anxiety

- Frequent worry about school, your health or the health of your loved ones, or bad things happening in the world
- Feeling tense or restless, having difficulty concentrating, or having trouble falling asleep at night due to worry
- Frequent stomachaches, headaches, or muscle tension

### Phobias

- Fear and avoidance of elevators, heights, storms, or water
- Fear of certain animals or insects
- Unreasonable fear of needles, blood, choking, or vomiting

### Social Anxiety

- Uncomfortable shyness or fear of doing or saying something embarrassing

- Panic when having to give an oral presentation or be the center of attention
- Difficulty starting or joining in conversations with others

### Panic Attacks

- Feeling frightened suddenly or for no apparent reason
- Racing heart, trouble breathing, or dizziness
- Strange, detached feeling, as if things are not real

### Agoraphobia

- Avoidance or fear of going into situations in which you have panicked before
- Fear of being trapped in places like cars and planes, or fear of going into tunnels or over bridges
- Fear of suddenly having to go to the bathroom but being trapped or far away, so that you cannot get there in time

### Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

- Frequent intrusive or unpleasant thoughts
- Fear and doubt about illness, germs, harming yourself or others, offending God, your sexual identity, or losing or forgetting things
- Need to know, or for things to be just right

### Separation Anxiety

- Avoiding being away from home or people who are important to you
- Worry that something terrible might happen to people

who are important to you when you are away from them

- Frequent calling or texting to make sure people you care about are okay

Now you have a better idea of the different types of anxiety. I hope you don't feel overwhelmed by this list. Sometimes names and labels can feel scary, especially if you are anxious to begin with. You may be thinking that this means there is something really wrong with you.

There is nothing wrong with you that you can't fix. The purpose of naming the types of anxiety you may suffer from is to give you specific and powerful tools that will help you manage your anxiety and gain confidence to live the life you want. But before you jump to the chapters that focus on your type—or types—of anxiety, let's look at what all anxious teens have in common.



## PART 1



### Chapter 1

# The Monkey Mind

Staying Alive

*One summer day about thirty thousand years ago, three young Cro-Magnon hunters were following reindeer tracks across a rocky plateau when they spotted their prey grazing on a patch of grass near a lone tree. They crouched down low and crept forward, gripping their spears in anticipation. Just as the hunters were closing in, they heard a faint rustle behind them. When they turned their heads they saw a saber-toothed tiger bearing down upon them. The terrified hunters bolted, and so did the deer. All three hunters made it back to camp. The deer wasn't so lucky.*

**O**ne thing, at least, has not changed in thirty thousand years. Whether it is a charging saber-toothed tiger on a prehistoric plain or a car running a red light when you are crossing an intersection, the human reaction is instantaneous. Our brains are hardwired for survival. Your brain's number one job is staying alive.

Your brain tells your body when to relax and when to respond to danger. When there is danger your nervous system acts in an instant, before you have time to form thoughts or make plans—like a smoke detector in your house that sounds the alarm before you can smell the smoke. It's called the *fight-or-flight response*, and we share it not only with deer but with all creatures that have a brain.

*The next day the three hungry hunters set out again in search of prey and again they found some reindeer tracks. They weren't following the trail very long, however, before they spotted several tiger prints. The first hunter grunted and kept going, apparently unconcerned. The second hunter spun around and ran back to camp. The third hunter wiped his brow and took a few deep breaths. He was anxious, but he was also hungry. After studying the direction of the tracks, he headed off in the opposite direction. Shortly afterward, he speared a deer. He was the hero in the tales of the day's hunt told by the fire that night.*

Even when there is no imminent threat, your brain is still looking for danger. Although you are usually unaware of it, a primitive part of your brain is constantly scanning your surroundings, remembering past events and looking into the future, deciding what is safe for you to do and what is not. Although neuroscientists are learning new things all the time about how that part of the brain works, it is still a mystery exactly how we decide which risks to take, and why our decisions vary so much from person to person.

The “fearless” hunter who ignored the tracks continued on the trail and wound up being killed by the tiger. The hunter who was made anxious by the tracks, and changed his plans accordingly, survived and thrived. Being able to feel some anxiety, even when there is no immediate threat, can help you make good decisions and stay alive. But what about the hunter who turned and ran even though there was no tiger present and thus no imminent danger?



*The following day the most anxious hunter, embarrassed because he had run away the previous day, joined a hunting party, determined to make good of himself. But*

*every rustling of a leaf sounded like a tiger; every footprint on the ground looked like a tiger track. Just thinking about the tiger made the hunter's heart beat fast and his stomach turn, almost as if a tiger was right there in front of him. He slowed down the hunting party so much that he was left behind. In the tales of the hunt by the fire that night his name wasn't mentioned.*

Feeling more anxiety than a situation calls for is certainly not adaptive. It stops you from doing what you want and need to do—which, in our anxious hunter's case, was bringing home meat for his family and tribe.

The anxious hunter's problem, and yours, is that fight-or-flight responses feel real whether there is real danger or not. If your brain reacts to a situation as dangerous—even if it's not—your nervous system will act accordingly, making your heart beat like a drum, your skin break out in sweat, your fingers tingle, your stomach nauseous, your throat constricted, and your head spin. The system is sounding false alarms, like a smoke detector that goes off every time you make a piece of toast.

Regardless of what else you are doing, this system keeps humming away in the background. If you are genetically—or for whatever reason—extra sensitive to threats, you are likely getting lots of alerts warning you about bad things about to happen. I like to think of this part of the brain as the *monkey mind*. Its relentless stream of scary thoughts is like a frightened monkey's chatter.



The story of the three hunters illustrates an important point about anxiety: it is not the situation that triggers how we feel and what we do, but rather *what we think* about the situation. When a wildly threat-sensitive monkey with a loud alarm is doing the thinking, its scary chatter keeps setting off false alarms, filling you with anxiety that stops you from going where you want to go and being who you want to be.

This book will show you how to stop your monkey mind from ruling your life—how to make choices that are not dictated by fear. You will learn to identify monkey chatter, ignore false alarms, and take back control of your life. After all, there is more to living than just staying alive. You can live the life you want to live!