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Contents

Introduction

ABOUT ANXIETY

- 1. Why Do You Get Anxious?**
 - 2. Anxiety's Aliases**
 - 3. Recognizing Anxiety in Your Body**
 - 4. Your Anxiety Triggers**
 - 5. Tracking Your Anxiety**
 - 6. Avoidance and Distraction Traps**
 - 7. Keeping Your Body Healthy**
 - 8. Finding Balance**
 - 9. Don't Believe Everything You Think!**
 - 10. Anxiety in Disguise**
 - 11. Building on Your Strengths**
 - 12. Thought Distortions**
 - 13. Worrying on Purpose**
-

MINDFULNESS: PAYING ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT

- 14. What Does Mindfulness Have to Do with Anxiety?**
- 15. The Power of Singletasking**
- 16. Bodily Tension**
- 17. Body Scan**
- 18. Bringing Mindfulness to Your Anxiety**
- 19. The Present Moment**

- 20. Visualizing the Present**
- 21. Clearing the Mind**
- 22. Bringing Mindfulness to Your Emotions**
- 23. Bringing Mindfulness to Everyday Activities**

AT HOME

- 24. Making Your Space Peaceful**
- 25. Fighting in the Family**
- 26. Mindfulness Through Music**
- 27. Alone Time**
- 28. Calming Your Mind for Sleep**

AT SCHOOL

- 29. Mindful Planning**
- 30. School Phobia**
- 31. Staying Calm in the Classroom**
- 32. Approaching Teachers and Other Adults**
- 33. Class Presentations**
- 34. Test Anxiety**
- 35. Writer's Block**
- 36. Cafeteria Concerns**

IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

- 37. Your Social Anxiety Triggers**
- 38. Dealing with Difficult People**
- 39. When a Friend Is Struggling**
- 40. The Pressure of Parties and Proms**
- 41. Talking on the Phone**

- 42. Dating and Relationships
- 43. Using Social Media
- 44. Mindful Self-Compassion

PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

- 45. Job and College Interviews
- 46. Athletics
- 47. Putting on Performances
- 48. Stage Fright
- 49. Driving
- 50. Panic Attacks
- 51. Making Decisions

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Introduction

In my years of working with young adults from many different backgrounds and situations, I've found that it is the smartest and most creative ones who suffer the most from anxiety. I believe that anxiety is the result of a smart, creative mind run amok. Think about it—if you are suffering from anxiety, you can probably think of dozens of reasons why your class presentation will go wrong, why the prom will be a disaster, or why your parents will be disappointed in you. The minds of most other people don't generate nearly as many ideas, either positive or anxious.

The good news is that you don't have to be afraid of your own mind any longer. With some help and some hard work, and by using some of the practices in this book, you can get that amazing mind of yours back to working *for* you, not *against* you.

One of the best adages I've heard essentially says that our thoughts can be our greatest servants or our worst masters. This adage rings very true for me as someone who has seen and helped hundreds if not thousands of people overcome anxiety disorders. When our minds are working for us, they can skillfully produce the answer to a math problem, process visual information from dozens of sources while we are driving at sixty miles per hour, or instruct our bodies in the thousands of muscle movements required just to dribble a basketball. But when our brains are misfiring, they can send us the wrong messages—that it's time to panic, that something terrible is about to happen to us or to someone we love—and that's when things start to get really scary in our minds.

It's not entirely clear why some of us have anxiety; researchers still don't completely agree. For a long time, debates raged about nature versus nurture; you've probably even discussed this in your science classes. What we understand today

is that anxiety is probably the result of both. You may have genes that make you more vulnerable to anxiety, and you may have experienced situations or stressors that are activating your anxiety.

Whatever the source of your anxiety, this book offers ways to deal with it in the moment, along with practices to help keep it at bay, and discusses some lifestyle changes for reducing stress that may be making your anxiety worse. It includes written exercises and also asks questions, with lines for writing down your responses. Some of these might feel too personal to write in this book, so feel free to write your answers elsewhere, or not at all; if you don't write, at least give the questions some thought.

Many of the tools have been adapted from very ancient practices, and others come from modern psychotherapy techniques. For example, the Body Scan ([activity 17](#)) and Lake Meditation ([activity 25](#)) are based on mindfulness-based stress reduction, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Thoughts on Parade ([activity 20](#)) was adapted from Steven Hayes's acceptance and commitment therapy, and ideas about wise mind ([activity 51](#)) are from Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy. Chris Germer inspired practices like The Compassionate Friend ([activity 27](#)), A Pebble for Your Pocket ([activity 40](#)), and, with Kristen Neff, Mind and Body ([activity 16](#)); the two write about mindful self-compassion. Noah Levine was the source of words to repeat when walking mindfully ([activity 30](#)), and Gregory Kramer (with others) developed the concept of insight dialogue ([activity 39](#)). My friend Ashley Sitkin helped me with the yoga practice ([activity 46](#)), and the acronym RAIN ([activity 50](#)) was developed by Michele McDonald.

If you feel like you need motivation, it can help to go through this book with a friend, relative, or therapist. And although you can skip around and just read the parts that feel most important to you, you will get the most out of the book by doing the whole thing start to finish, and regularly practicing what you've learned along the way.

Learning to manage day-to-day anxiety is not going to be an easy path, but it is a path that a lot of other teens and adults have

ABOUT ANXIETY

Some people have a genetic predisposition to anxiety; because of the genes they inherited, they are more likely to develop anxiety disorders than other people. But all of us experience anxiety at some point in our lives, and with good reason. We need a protective alarm system to alert us to danger and help us stay safe.

Having anxiety is like having an oversensitive alarm system that goes off at all the wrong times, keeping us from getting anything done. It can be downright embarrassing in the wrong situation. Or worse, it can end up putting us in more danger because we are so focused on the false alarm that we miss the signals of real danger.

It can be helpful to know what causes your anxiety, but sometimes it feels more important just to know what to do about it. That is the main goal of this book: to give you practical tools you can use for the toughest anxiety-provoking situations. It may feel hard to be young and facing anxiety, but the positive side is that once you work through your anxiety, which you can, you will be able to help yourself and others for the rest of your life.

And there is a lot of good news. For one thing, you are not alone. One in six teens has an anxiety disorder, which means there's a good chance someone else in your group of friends, a few other kids in every classroom you walk into or sports team you play on, and maybe even a few hundred kids in your entire school all have anxiety. In addition, one in four people will develop an anxiety problem in the course of their lives. You could consider yourself lucky to be getting a head start on learning to cope when you are young. But the best news of all is that anxiety gets better. It is possible to learn to minimize your

anxiety so it comes less often, and to deal with it when it does come, so that it no longer has so much power over you or what you want to do with your life.

why do you get anxious?

Like many illnesses, anxiety disorders tend to run in families. You might want to check with your parents and other relatives to see if they have struggled with anxiety and what they have done to overcome it.

Do you know anyone in your family who has or might have anxiety? Maybe a relative who seems high-strung or easily stressed out? If you can, talk to that person and write here what he or she has done to deal with anxiety.

Anxious people often start with this genetic predisposition. From there, certain events in their lives can make them a bit more anxious. If we've had bad experiences with public speaking in the past, it makes sense that we will start to feel anxious just thinking about it in the future. Even just watching someone else struggle with situations like that can teach us to be cautious, but it might also teach us to be anxious, depending on the circumstances. Some of us can get over these events quickly and move on, but for those of us who were born more sensitive, our alarm systems can reset themselves to go off more easily and get in our way even long after we are safe again. And of course, some experiences are far worse than bungling a class presentation and can affect us even more deeply.

What memories stand out for you or make you anxious just to think about?

Does anything you are anxious about stem from a bad experience someone you know has had? If so, write about what happened.

Think of people in your life you can speak with about some of these experiences. Consider friends, relatives, or other trustworthy adults. Write down their names here.

Think about how much of your anxiety you feel comfortable sharing with those people; it doesn't have to be your life story or your worst panic attack. Decide to share a bit with one person in the next week, and notice how you feel before, during, and after sharing.

There are a number of other factors that contribute to developing anxiety. For one thing, we live in a dangerous world. We get so many messages from the media, school, our parents, and our friends regarding what we should worry about, from terrorism to STDs, that it's no wonder we walk around with our alarm systems set to high alert. We each need a reliable alarm system for a dangerous world, but that system should also differentiate between realistic worries and unrealistic ones. This book can help you not believe everything you think or every signal your body sends your way.

What are some messages you've received that tell you the

world is a dangerous place?

What are some of your parents' and your friends' biggest worries?

Which, if any, of these worries have you "caught" from them?

So why do you get anxious? It is most likely a combination of your genes, events in your life, and the kind of world you've grown up in. The scientific term for this is the biopsychosocial model, a fancy phrase you can now casually drop into conversation in your next psychology class!

anxiety's aliases

Many people, when they first start experiencing anxiety, don't recognize the symptoms. That's because we don't always have experience with anxiety and are not well informed about it. It can be helpful to know what other feelings are often associated with anxiety.

Exercise: Identifying Anxiety by Other Names

Look over this list, and circle any words that you feel most apply to you. Use the blank lines to add other words or phrases about anxiety.

Afraid

Agitated

Alarmed

Apprehensive

Concerned

Edgy

Fearful

Freaking out

Fretful

Frightened

Frozen

Hesitant

Jittery

Nervous

Overwhelmed

Panicked

Petrified

Restless

Scared

Stressed

Terrified

Thoughts racing

Troubled

Tweaking out

Uneasy