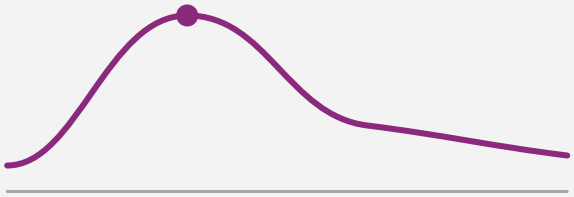
Self-help for anxiety

# Changing your relationship with anxiety



A practical guide inspired by psychotherapeutic practice

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# Who is this ebook for

People who feel anxious more often, or more intensely, than they would like, and want practical ways to manage it. This may look like:

- worrying and overthinking, especially "what if...?" thoughts
- physical anxiety: racing heart, tight chest, tense muscles, a churning stomach
- panic attacks, or fear of having another one
- anxiety in social situations, or about being judged
- avoiding places, people or tasks because of anxiety
- feeling stressed, overloaded and unable to switch off
- anxiety linked to difficult past experiences

I will not focus on medication for anxiety; please see your doctor for those options.

# Who this ebook is NOT for

Some anxiety is a normal and useful part of life. If yours comes and goes, matches the situation and doesn't stop you doing what matters to you, you may not need the rest of this ebook. Thank you for reading this far!

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or severe anxiety that stops them functioning are less likely to benefit from self-help alone, although some strategies may be useful. In these cases, specialised therapy is a better option.

If your anxiety is new, or you have new physical symptoms, please see your GP first. Some physical conditions and medications can cause anxiety-like symptoms.

> **If you need help now:** in the UK, call NHS 111 or speak to your GP. You can call Samaritans free, day or night, on 116 123. In an emergency, call 999 or go to A&E.

# About the author

**Who am I and why do I write on the topic?**

I am a Consultant in Medical Psychotherapy and General Adult Psychiatry.

"Medical psychotherapy" involves training in several psychotherapy modalities. My main therapy modality is psychodynamic psychotherapy, but I worked and trained in other modalities, such as dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT), EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing), systemic therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and several others.

Anxiety is one of the most common difficulties I see in my clinical work. It often sits alongside other difficulties, such as low mood, trauma, neurodivergence or stress at work, and it can quietly shape how people live their lives.

For several years, I have taught psychiatrists and other clinicians how to bring psychotherapy skills into everyday psychiatric appointments. In this ebook, I am bringing some of those same skills directly to you.

I aim to popularise psychotherapy knowledge outside of the therapy room.



# Introduction

**Anxiety** is not a flaw or a weakness. It is our body's alarm system, designed to keep us safe. When it senses danger, it gets us ready to fight, run or freeze.

The difficulty is that the alarm can become too sensitive. It goes off for an email, a social event, a body sensation or a thought about the future, as if these were real dangers. Our body reacts as if we were in danger, even when we are safe.

We may know rationally that there is nothing to fear, but from knowing to feeling calm is a long way.

Most of us try to get rid of anxiety: we avoid what makes us anxious, we seek reassurance, we distract ourselves or we try to think our way out of it. These strategies give short-term relief, but in the long term they teach the brain that the danger was real, and the anxiety grows.

Lasting change comes from changing our **relationship** with anxiety: understanding it, learning to calm the body, making room for the feeling and slowly returning to the life we want, even when anxiety comes along.

You'll likely find one or two strategies more valuable and resonate less with others. That's ok. It may remain like that, or different methods may become helpful later.

This ebook is about understanding yourself, your feelings, what role anxiety plays in your life and how you can live more freely alongside it.

# How to use this ebook

This ebook is a collection of strategies to manage anxiety. It is written as a workbook with practical steps to follow.

I didn't include the science, research or a long introduction, as I want this resource to be as practical as possible. I summarised the techniques that I found most helpful in my clinical work and teaching.

In my clinical work, I see people who like a structured approach, with clear goals and tasks between sessions. But I also see people who would like to have the space to explore their internal world and better understand themselves. Therefore, I included approaches from a wide range of psychotherapies, and if you resonate with one or another, it can be a good first step towards that approach, which you may want to deepen with further resources or decide to find a psychotherapist.

The strategies described can be used as "self-help". You need to read each technique and practise it several times until you feel you have mastered it. Don't decide that it doesn't work before trying.

> **A tip:** practise the calming skills when you are only mildly anxious, or calm. Like learning to swim, it is easier to learn in shallow water. When you need them in a difficult moment, your body will already know what to do.

Like any therapy strategy, it's easier to implement if working with a psychotherapist. However, most psychotherapists don't work in all the therapy models listed; you may need to select the ideas you resonate with and find someone who works along those lines.

# Content


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# Let's start with judgements about anxiety

If you call your anxiety "stupid", "pathetic" or "a weakness", you may extend these judgements to yourself, and feel anxious about being anxious. This adds a second layer of distress on top of the first.

Anxiety serves a purpose for you. It is trying to protect you, even when it gets it wrong. It may be warning you about something that was dangerous in the past, or about something that matters to you now.

We often hear messages such as "don't worry", "calm down" or "just think positive". They imply that anxiety is a choice and that we are failing if we still feel it. Nobody chooses to be anxious.

Even the most unpleasant anxiety can have temporary benefits; it can focus us, motivate us to prepare, or alert us that something needs attention. Nothing is entirely good or bad.

**PRACTICE**

Start by noticing how you describe your anxiety. If you catch yourself calling it, or yourself, in harsh terms, notice that.

Next, describe the anxiety for what it is and what it is trying to do for you. For example, "My body is in alarm mode because it thinks this presentation is dangerous" or "This anxiety is trying to protect me from being rejected" (rather than "I'm pathetic, I can't even make a phone call").



# Understanding the alarm

When the alarm goes off, the body releases adrenaline and prepares to act. This explains many of the sensations we feel:

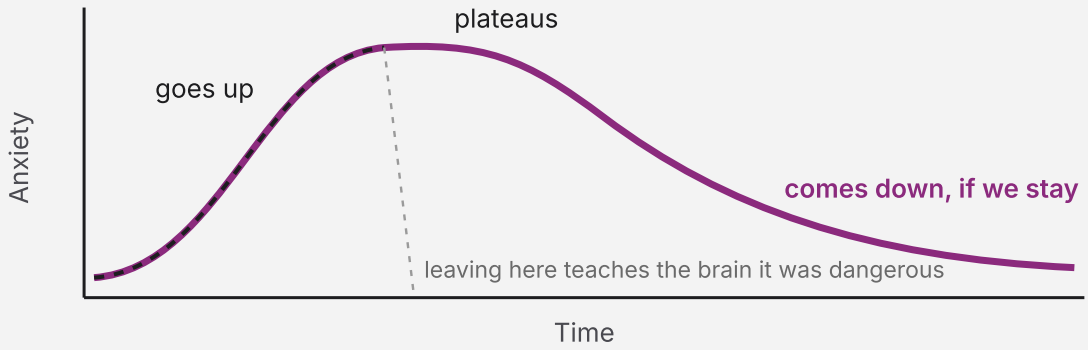
- a faster heartbeat, to pump blood to the muscles
- faster breathing, which can make us feel short of breath or light-headed
- tense muscles, shaking or restlessness
- a churning stomach, nausea or needing the toilet
- sweating, feeling hot or cold
- a mind that focuses on the threat and finds it hard to think about anything else

These sensations are unpleasant, but they are not dangerous in themselves. They are the body doing its job.

### Anxiety is self-limiting

Anxiety goes up, then plateaus, then comes down. The body cannot stay at the peak indefinitely. A panic attack usually peaks within minutes and then eases, even if we do nothing.

When we escape or avoid at the peak, we never learn that the anxiety would have come down on its own. The brain concludes: "I only survived because I left."



# Mindfulness

**In short, what is mindfulness?**

It is about being fully present in the NOW, noticing reality as it is. Our thoughts usually go to a thousand different places, but mindfulness is about returning your mind to the activity or experience you want to focus on.

We can get better at being mindful by practising it regularly. You don't need to spend long periods (unless you want to), but you can integrate it into your daily life.

## Why does this help with anxiety?

Anxiety mostly lives in the future. It is busy with "what if...?" and with all the ways things could go wrong. Sometimes it lives in the past, replaying what we said or did.

Mindfulness brings us back to the present moment, which is usually more manageable than the one our mind is imagining.

It also helps us notice anxiety early, before it builds, and to observe thoughts as thoughts rather than facts.



# Mindfulness

Here are a few **exercises** that you can practise **"on the go"**, as part of your day-to-day activities:

1. When you brush your teeth or shower, practise focusing on the physical sensations and the action you are performing. Your mind will likely want to go somewhere else but bring it back to what you set as the focus of attention.

2. Practise being mindful when you go for a walk. Notice nature, feel the breeze, or focus on your body movements. Practise bringing your attention back to the set focus.

3. Yoga (or other exercise) mindfulness. Focus your mind on how your body feels and work on keeping your attention focused on body movements.

4. When you go to bed, scan your body for a few seconds and then focus your attention on your breath. Notice your in-breath and out-breath, without trying to change it. If it's easier, count the breaths up to 10. Your mind will likely wander, but practise bringing it back to breathing. End with another body scan before drifting to sleep.

5. When you drink your morning coffee or tea, notice the warmth of the cup, the smell and the taste. Notice the first sip, and the last.

> Each time your mind wanders and you bring it back, you are training the same "muscle" you will use when your mind runs off with a worry.

# Mindfulness

## Step one – grounding in the present

Grounding brings your attention out of your anxious thoughts and back into the room, through your senses. It is useful when anxiety is building, or when you feel "spaced out" or far away.

### The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise

Slowly, and without rushing, notice:

1. **5** things you can see. Look for details: colours, shapes, light and shadow.
2. **4** things you can feel. Your feet on the floor, your back against the chair, the texture of your clothes.
3. **3** things you can hear. Near sounds and far sounds.
4. **2** things you can smell (or two smells you like, if nothing is around).
5. **1** thing you can taste.

### Other quick grounding ideas

- Press your feet firmly into the floor and notice the contact.
- Hold something with an interesting texture: a stone, a key, a soft fabric.
- Name, silently or out loud, where you are, the date and what you are doing.

Practise grounding daily, for at least a week, before moving to the next step

# Mindfulness

## Step two – making room for anxiety

When you have mastered the above, practise turning towards the anxiety rather than away from it. This may sound counter-intuitive, but fighting anxiety usually makes it stronger.

1. **Notice** where you feel the anxiety in your body. Is it in your chest, throat, stomach or shoulders?
2. **Describe** it, as if you were curious about it: is it tight, heavy, fluttering, hot? Does it have a shape or a size? Is it still, or moving?
3. **Breathe** slowly, and imagine your breath flowing around that area, giving it some space.
4. **Allow** it to be there. You don't have to like it. You are just letting it be, without adding fear or judgement on top.
5. **Watch** how it changes. Sensations rarely stay the same for long.

### Thoughts are not facts

Anxious thoughts feel urgent and true. A helpful skill (from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, ACT) is to put a little distance between you and the thought. Instead of "I'm going to fail", try saying "I'm having the thought that I'm going to fail".

You may notice that the thought loses some of its grip. It becomes something your mind is doing, rather than the truth about the situation.

**This takes us to the next step.**

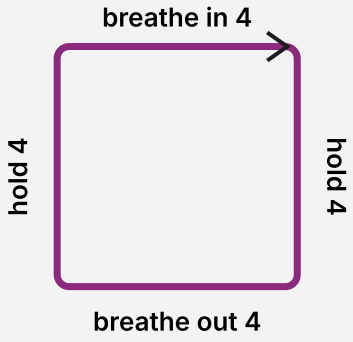
# Calming the body

## Breathing

Anxiety lives in the body as much as in the mind. Sometimes the quickest way to calm the mind is through the body. Having a range of breathing techniques will help to reduce anxiety "on the go".

- **Slow breathing.** Breathe low and slow, with your abdomen moving up and down, and with longer out-breaths than in-breaths. For example, in for 4, out for 6.
- **"Square breathing".** Breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, each for a count of 4.
- **Humming.** Slow deep breathing with a "uuuu" exhale, or whatever sound feels comfortable (I expect that you'll prefer this when alone).
- **Breathe and relax.** Contract some muscle when you inhale (e.g. make a fist), relax when you exhale. You can tell yourself "relax" when you breathe out and relax your muscles.

> **Slow, not big.** When anxious, many people take big gulps of air, which can make them feel more breathless and light-headed. The aim is a gentle, slow breath and a long, relaxed out-breath, not a deep one.



# Calming the body

## When anxiety is very high

When anxiety is very intense, it can be hard to think or to use breathing alone. These skills, many of them from DBT (dialectical behaviour therapy), work quickly through the body:

- **Cold water.** Splash cold water on your face, or hold something cool against your face for half a minute. This can slow the heart rate. If you have a heart condition, check with your doctor first.
- **Move.** A brisk walk, climbing stairs, or a few "jumping jacks" use up the adrenaline your body has released.
- **Tense and release.** Tense one muscle group for a few seconds (shoulders, hands, legs), then let it go and notice the difference. Move through your body.
- **Shake it out.** Gently shake your hands, arms and legs, as animals do after a fright.

### Everyday tension

We tend to accumulate tension in our bodies when stressed, often without noticing. Do regular body scans, checking in with your body during the day. When noticing tension, aim to relax that body area by changing position, stretching or with self-massage.



# Self-exploration

## What do I mean?

I am referring to **being aware of your feelings, thoughts and actions** when anxiety shows up. The mindfulness above helps to notice them.

What happens before the anxiety starts? Where are you, and who are you with? What is the first thing you notice: a thought, an image, a body sensation? What do you do next?

Whatever it is, notice it without being harsh on yourself. You may start noticing patterns.

It's easier to keep track if you keep a diary. An example is on the next page, but you can create your own or print this one.

### Start an anxiety diary

Start the diary when you expect a "typical week" ahead of you, with a usual weekly pattern. Ideally, record soon after each time you notice anxiety. If you don't have time, allocate some time in the evening to record the whole day.

Spend at least a week recording, then start looking at the recorded data in detail.



# Anxiety diary

| Day, time | Where I was, what I was doing | Anxiety before (0-10) | Body sensations | Thoughts, images, feelings | What I did | Anxiety after (0-10) | Other reflections |
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# Self-exploration

## The anxiety chain

When you look back at your diary, you may notice that anxiety follows a chain of links. Seeing the chain helps us find places where we can do something different. (This idea comes from "chain analysis" in DBT.)

**Trigger** – an email from my manager: "Can we talk tomorrow?"

↓

**Thought** – "I've done something wrong. I'll lose my job."

↓

**Body and feeling** – racing heart, tight chest, fear

↓

**Action** – check old emails for mistakes, ask a colleague for reassurance

↓

**Short-term** – a little relief

↓

**Long-term** – worry all evening, poor sleep, the anxiety feels justified

Look for the links you can change. Could you notice the thought as a thought? Use a breathing skill when your body reacts? Choose a different action, such as writing the worry down for later, or going for a walk?

It is not about stopping yourself from feeling anxious. Trying to forbid anxiety makes it more likely to grow. It is about stopping for a minute to notice the chain, so that the anxiety has less power over what you do next.

Let's now look at some common faces of anxiety. Read the ones that apply to you, based on the self-exploration done so far. Skip the irrelevant ones.

# Self-exploration

## Worry and overthinking

Worry can feel useful, as if by thinking about every possibility we will be prepared. In reality, worry rarely solves anything; it just keeps the alarm switched on.

Alternatives:

- **Ask: can I do something about this now?** If yes, make a small plan and take the first step. If not, the worry is hypothetical, and the task is to let it go for now (with the skills in this ebook), rather than to solve it.
- **Allocate a "worry time".** Choose 15-20 minutes at the same time each day (not just before bed). When worries come up during the day, write them down and postpone them to worry time. During worry time, go through the list and think about how you can problem-solve. You may find that many worries no longer seem important.
- **Write it down.** Worries are bigger in our heads than on paper. Writing them down gives some distance.
- **Notice the "what ifs".** Name it: "my mind is doing what-ifs again". Then gently bring your attention back to the present, using grounding.
- **Talk** to people about your worries and challenges. Notice, though, if talking turns into seeking reassurance again and again (more on this later).



# Self-exploration

## Panic and body sensations

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear, with strong body sensations: a pounding heart, breathlessness, dizziness, tingling, or a feeling that something terrible is happening. It is frightening, and many people go to A&E the first time, convinced it is a heart attack.

Once we have had a panic attack, we may start watching our body for signs of the next one. Noticing a normal sensation, such as a skipped heartbeat, can then set off the alarm again.

Alternatives:

- **Name it** when you identify it in your body, such as "this is panic; it is my alarm system".
- **Remember that it is self-limiting:** it goes up, then plateaus, then comes down. It shall pass.
- **Don't fight it.** Let the wave come and pass, breathing slowly with a long out-breath.
- **Stay** where you are, if it is safe to do so, rather than escaping. Each time you stay, your brain learns that it can cope.
- **Ground** yourself, using the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise.

> If you have new or unexplained physical symptoms, such as chest pain, please see a doctor to rule out a physical cause. Once physical causes have been excluded, you can feel more confident that the sensations are anxiety.

# Self-exploration

## Social anxiety

Fear of being judged, of saying the wrong thing, or of others noticing that we are anxious. In social situations, our attention turns inwards, to how we look and sound, and we become our own harshest critic.

Alternatives:

- **Turn your attention outwards.** Focus on the other person, what they are saying and what you are curious about, rather than on how you are coming across.
- **Notice "safety behaviours".** Avoiding eye contact, rehearsing sentences, holding a drink to hide shaking hands, staying at the edge of the room. These feel protective, but they keep the fear going and can make us seem less warm. Try dropping one at a time.
- **Go easy on the "post-mortem".** After a social event, many people replay every moment and focus on what went wrong. Notice when you are doing this, and ask what a kind friend would say.
- **Reframe the anxiety as excitement** when relevant: "I am excited to meet new people".
- **Take small steps,** using the step-by-step approach later in this ebook.



# Self-exploration

## Stress and overload

When we have too much to do and too little time or support, the alarm stays on for long periods. We may feel on edge, irritable, unable to switch off or sleep, and small things can tip us over.

Alternatives: focus on strategies to reduce and manage stress during the day, such as

- Regular breaks to breathe deeply and slowly for a minute. Focus on having longer out-breaths than in-breaths, with abdominal breathing.
- Stretching in the longer breaks. When you get a break, move your body and if you feel stiff, do some self-massage or gentle stretches.
- Make sure that you have regular self-care routines.
- Walking or other physical activities can also be very helpful in reducing stress levels.
- Talk to people about your worries and challenges.
- Look at what is in your control. Can anything be delegated, postponed, or done "well enough" rather than perfectly? Can you say no to something?

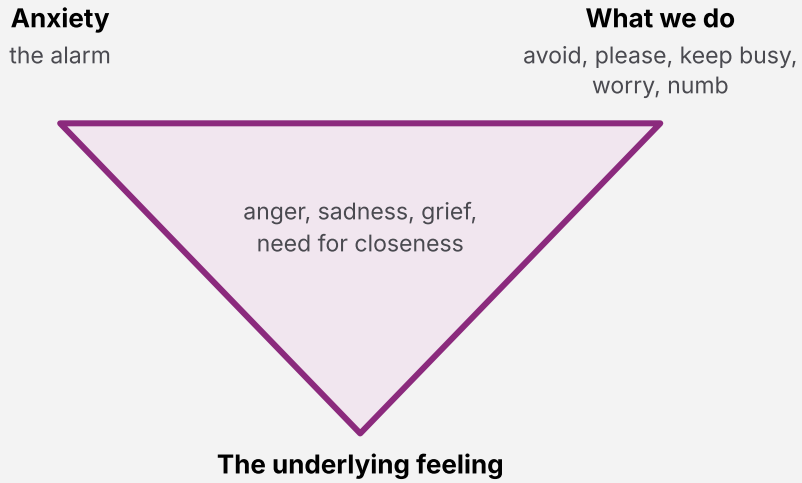
Sometimes the stress is a signal that something in our life needs to change. Thinking about the problem is the first step.

# Self-exploration

## When anxiety covers other feelings

In psychodynamic therapy, we often find that anxiety is not the whole story. It can appear when another feeling is getting close to the surface, a feeling that, at some point in our life, felt unsafe to have or to show. This may be anger, sadness, grief, longing to be close to someone, or even joy.

We can draw this as a triangle (inspired by David Malan's "triangle of conflict"):




For example, someone who learned as a child that anger was dangerous may feel anxious, rather than angry, when treated unfairly, and may then try even harder to please.

> **PRACTICE**
>
> Next time you feel anxious, ask gently: "If I weren't anxious right now, what might I be feeling?" Notice whatever comes up, without judgement. Writing about it can help.

If you recognise a strong or recurring pattern, this is something psychotherapy can help with.

# Behavioural strategies

## The avoidance trap

Avoidance is the most natural response to anxiety, and the one that keeps it going the most.

When we avoid something we fear, we feel relief. The brain learns: "avoiding kept me safe". Next time, the anxiety is a little stronger, and the list of things we avoid grows. Our life can become smaller and smaller, organised around anxiety.

Avoidance is not always obvious. It can include:

- not going to places, events or appointments
- putting off emails, calls or tasks (procrastination)
- going only with a "safe" person
- leaving early, or sitting near the exit
- using alcohol, food, scrolling or being constantly busy to avoid feeling anxious

The way out is to approach, gradually, the things we fear, and to stay long enough for the anxiety to come down. This is called "exposure" in CBT. It works best when it is planned, step by step, and done by choice.



# Behavioural strategies

## Step by step

1. Choose one thing you avoid that you would like to be able to do.
2. Break it into small steps, from the easiest to the hardest. Rate how anxious each step would make you (0-10).
3. Start with a step that feels challenging but manageable, around 3-4 out of 10.
4. Stay in the situation until the anxiety starts to come down, ideally to about half. Use your breathing and grounding skills, but try not to escape or distract completely.
5. Repeat the same step several times, until it feels easier, then move up to the next one.

**An example: travelling by bus**

1. Stand at the bus stop and watch buses (3/10)
2. Travel one stop with a friend (4/10)
3. Travel one stop alone (5/10)
4. Travel three stops alone, off-peak (6/10)
5. Travel into town at a busy time (8/10)




It is ok if some days are harder than others. Progress with anxiety is rarely a straight line. What matters is the overall direction.

# Behavioural strategies

## Reassurance and checking

When we are anxious, we often look for certainty: we ask others if everything is ok, we search online for symptoms, we check that the door is locked again, or we re-read an email many times before sending it.

Reassurance brings relief, but it doesn't last. Soon, another doubt appears, and we need more reassurance. The anxiety learns that we cannot cope with uncertainty on our own.

A few techniques to help:

- Notice the urge to check or seek reassurance, and name it: "this is the anxiety wanting certainty".
- Delay it. Tell yourself you can check in 10 minutes, if you still need to. Often, the urge passes.
- Reduce it gradually: check once instead of three times; search online for one minute instead of an hour.
- Tell your family and friends what you are working on, so they can support you kindly, without always providing the reassurance.
- Practise living with small uncertainties: sending an email without re-reading it, trying a new route, or letting someone else plan the day.

Life always holds some uncertainty. Learning to tolerate it is one of the most freeing skills in managing anxiety.

# Behavioural strategies

## Lifestyle and environment

Our daily habits can turn the alarm up or down. Lifestyle changes don't replace therapy or medication, but they make every other strategy work better.

- **Caffeine.** Coffee, energy drinks, strong tea and some soft drinks can cause a racing heart and jitteriness, which the body can read as anxiety. Try reducing gradually, especially after midday.
- **Alcohol.** It may calm anxiety in the moment, but as it wears off, anxiety often returns stronger, sometimes the next morning. It also disrupts sleep.
- **Sleep.** Anxiety and poor sleep feed each other. Aim for regular bed and wake times, a wind-down routine and less screen time before bed.
- **Movement.** Regular physical activity is one of the best natural anxiety reducers. It also teaches the body that a fast heartbeat is not dangerous.
- **Daylight and routine.** Get outside in daylight, ideally in the morning, and keep regular meal and sleep times.
- **News and phone.** Notice how you feel after scrolling or reading the news. Set limits, and choose times of the day without your phone.
- **People.** Spending time with people we feel safe with calms the nervous system. Make time for social connection, even when anxiety tells you to stay home.

# Address the underlying trauma

This is not easy to explain in an ebook, and some people may need therapy or help from a psychotherapist.

In some cases, anxiety is linked to earlier experiences: growing up in an unpredictable or frightening environment, being bullied, losing someone suddenly, or a traumatic event. When we have lived through danger, the alarm system learns to stay switched on, scanning for the next threat, even when we are now safe.

It is hard to fully address anxiety when the underlying trauma is not addressed. In therapy, the person needs to reach a sense of freedom from the past, where they can make their own decisions in the here and now.

Each person's story is different, and there isn't one approach that fits all.

If trauma impacts your anxiety, the best thing you can do is to have psychotherapy. If you can't access it, here are some suggestions, as self-help strategies.

The previously described exercises, noticing what triggers your anxiety, are a good first step. They bring more self-awareness.

# Address the underlying trauma

After you identify the feelings, learn to tolerate them. You may need to distract yourself when the intensity is too high or you need to remain socially functional, but the overall aim is to learn to "sit with them".

When you feel strong enough emotionally to allow your feelings to come without the need to distract, you will start learning from them. Try to allow your feelings and thoughts to wander. Either write without any agenda or speak into a recording app, or just by yourself. Allow whatever comes and see where it takes you.

If it takes you to dark places (abuse, trauma), ground yourself by noticing the present moment (focus on breathing or the things around you). Tell yourself that this is stuff from the past and that you are safe now.

> **"That was then, this is now."** A helpful phrase when the alarm goes off because something in the present reminds you of the past. Notice what is different now: where you are, how old you are, who is with you, what you can do now that you couldn't then.

You can also do imagery exercises, building a compassionate image or place (as in Compassion-Focused Therapy) to help increase self-compassion and a sense of safety. Examples are below.



# Address the underlying trauma

### Building a compassionate image for ourselves

For this exercise, find a comfortable position and practise slow breathing, aiming for a calm state of mind. Think about the attributes of compassion: wise, strong, warm, understanding, and non-judgemental. Slowly create an image in your mind, of someone or something wise, non-judgemental, who has an accepting attitude towards you, who you feel can accept you for who you are, even if they knew your darkest secrets.

If you are unfamiliar with using imagery, creating this image may take a few attempts. Try to have a complete picture, seeing the shape, expression, size, colours, and tone of voice. You may use the memory of someone you know who was compassionate towards you but it needs to be someone fully accepting and non-judgemental.

Play around with creating this image. After you build it, you can use it whenever you need it: when you are anxious, harsh towards yourself, or feel down, unaccepted, or unloved.

> When anxiety shows up, imagine your compassionate image beside you. What would they say to you? How would their voice sound? Let them speak to the anxious part of you.

# Address the underlying trauma

### Building a safe place

This exercise is similar in the sense that it also involves imagery. Find a comfortable position and practise slow, deep breathing. When you are relaxed, imagine a place where you can feel safe, calm and peaceful. Imagine the place in great detail: what does it look like? What colours can you see? What sounds can you hear? Is there anyone else around? Focus on how you feel, on sensations associated with the place, such as the sun on your face or the air breeze. Allow any body tension to melt and continue to breathe slowly.

You may associate this place with a gesture or a smell to help take you back to the safe place in the future (for example, using aromatherapy while you do the practice, or touching your fingers together when you reach a safe feeling).

You can recreate this imagery to bring back the feelings of safety; in subsequent practices, it will be quicker. With practice, the gesture or smell alone may bring back some of the calm, which can be useful in anxious moments.



# Address the underlying trauma

### EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing)

EMDR is an established, evidence-based therapy for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and NICE recommends it for adults with PTSD. It can also help with other painful memories that keep affecting how we feel and behave in the present, including memories that fuel anxiety.

In EMDR, you briefly focus on a painful memory while doing "bilateral stimulation": eye movements, tapping or sounds that alternate from side to side. Over the course of therapy, the memory usually becomes less distressing and feels more like part of the past.

### Why it needs a therapist

Working directly on painful memories can stir up strong feelings, sometimes more than we expect. A trained EMDR therapist first helps you build ways to stay grounded, then guides the processing at a safe pace and makes sure each session ends with you feeling settled. For this reason, I don't recommend using EMDR on painful memories by yourself.

To find an accredited EMDR therapist in the UK, see the EMDR Association UK directory.

# Address the underlying trauma

### A calming exercise you can try: the butterfly hug

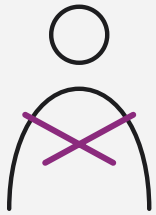
This exercise uses bilateral stimulation to soothe, not to process memories.

1. Sit comfortably and cross your arms over your chest, so each hand rests just below the opposite collarbone.
2. Breathe slowly, with longer out-breaths than in-breaths.
3. Gently tap your hands, alternating left and right, at a slow, steady pace.
4. Bring to mind your safe place or compassionate image from the previous pages, and notice any sense of calm in your body.
5. Continue for a minute or two, then stop and notice how you feel.

If unpleasant memories come up, stop tapping, open your eyes and ground yourself in the present by noticing your breathing and the things around you.

### Finding an EMDR therapist

In the UK, the EMDR Association UK keeps a directory of accredited therapists. You can also ask your GP whether EMDR is available locally on the NHS.



# Work on self-acceptance

It's important not to see yourself as "broken" or as someone who will only be ok once the anxiety has gone. Given your early life, your experiences and your circumstances, your anxiety makes sense.

**Your anxiety makes sense.**
**You are not your anxiety.**

What we are trying to achieve is acceptance and change at the same time. Acceptance without improvement can lead to feeling stuck and stagnation; focusing on change alone suggests that we are not ok the way we are. I find that acceptance with action towards change is the middle path towards improving the status quo.

## A part of me is anxious

Some therapies, such as Internal Family Systems (IFS), describe our mind as having different "parts". Instead of "I am anxious", try "a part of me is anxious". This reminds you that there are other parts too: a calm part, a curious part, a brave part.

You can get curious about the anxious part. What is it afraid of? What is it trying to protect you from? How old does it feel? Often, an anxious part is a younger part of us that learned to be on guard. It may respond better to kindness than to criticism.

# Imagery

Imagery techniques are used in different forms of counselling, therapy and sport coaching. If you imagine something in great detail, including the visual aspect, the step-by-step details, and the feelings associated, it helps your brain get ready for that activity. And it prepares you for it.

You may have heard of athletes who use imagery to prepare for a race or event. I use it before long runs or when I want to challenge my limits. I imagine what I am going to do in great detail, including the pain and the possibility of wanting to give up (as I know it's very likely, so better to prepare to overcome it). I imagine how I motivate myself and go past that and continue running. It helps if I imagine the route, clothing and other details so it's as specific as possible.

The same applies to anxiety. Rather than imagining everything going perfectly, imagine the anxiety showing up, and imagine yourself coping with it.

Our anxious mind already uses imagery, but usually to picture the worst-case scenario. Here, we are using the same ability on purpose, to rehearse coping.



# Imagery

**Some examples of using imagery:**

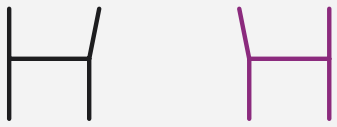
- Imagine in detail a situation that makes you anxious, for example, a presentation at work. See the room, the people, what you are wearing. Notice the anxiety rising in your body. Then imagine yourself breathing slowly, feeling your feet on the floor and continuing, even though you are anxious. Imagine how you feel at the end, having done it.
- Rehearse the next step on your exposure ladder. Imagine it in detail before doing it in real life. This makes the real step easier, as your brain has already practised it.
- Imagine your anxiety as a wave. Watch it rise, reach its peak and slowly come back down, while you stay on the shore, breathing.
- You can imagine how you get tired at the end of the day and listen to some nice song and relax your body and mind, letting the worries of the day go (instead of carrying them to bed).
- In case of trauma (if therapy is not available), imagine the adult you comforting the younger, frightened child version of you. Imagine yourself giving comfort to the younger you. It may feel very difficult to do this exercise; start by gentle acknowledgement and work towards encouragement, reassurance and love to the younger you. This last example is more challenging; practise after imagery becomes easy for you, and you have made some progress.

# Imagery

### Have different versions of you work together

Often, when we think about the younger us, we can be surprised by some of our decisions or behaviours. The same will apply in the future. I am proposing an exercise to use this for your benefit.

1. Allocate at least 10 minutes to practise.
2. Find a comfortable position, in a room where you won't be disturbed. Have two chairs or two sitting places available.
3. Start by breathing slowly a few times, to be in a calm state of mind.
4. Imagine a version of you 10 years older, who has learned to live alongside anxiety. They still feel anxious sometimes, but anxiety no longer decides how they live.
5. Try to imagine the older you in detail. How do they spend their days? What do they do now that they used to avoid? How do they speak to themselves when anxiety shows up? How do they look, move and sleep?
6. Now step into the role of the older you. Move to the other chair and stay there for a minute, trying to get into the role.
7. From that place, your older self, look towards your current self. Give yourself advice that feels relevant. Tell your current self what helped. Tell them what you are glad they stopped avoiding, and what you wish they had worried less about.



# Imagery

To take the exercise further, you can write a letter to your current self, from your older self.

Put in a letter everything you'd like the current you to know and to do, so that the older version of you has a freer, fuller life. Include what you'd like to say about the anxiety itself: what it was trying to do, and how you learned to live with it.

Keep the letter somewhere you can find it, and read it when anxiety is high, or when you need a reminder of why you are doing this work.



# Expectation effect

This is a more surprising phenomenon.

Research suggests that how we interpret our body's stress response changes how it affects us. People who are encouraged to see their racing heart and faster breathing as the body preparing them to perform, rather than as a sign of danger, often feel more confident and perform better under pressure.

Anxiety and excitement feel very similar in the body: a faster heartbeat, "butterflies", energy. The difference is mainly in the story we tell ourselves. Trying to "calm down" when we are highly aroused is hard. Re-labelling the feeling as excitement is often easier.

Similarly, if we believe that stress is always harmful, we tend to fight it, avoid it and worry about it, which adds to the stress. If we see it as a sign that something matters to us, and as a resource for the challenge ahead, we use it differently.

You can see the same racing heart as fear or as readiness, and the resulting experience will differ.



# Expectation effect

## -self-talk-

So acceptance that anxiety is a natural, protective part of being human is key! You don't need to get rid of anxiety, but to have a different relationship with it.

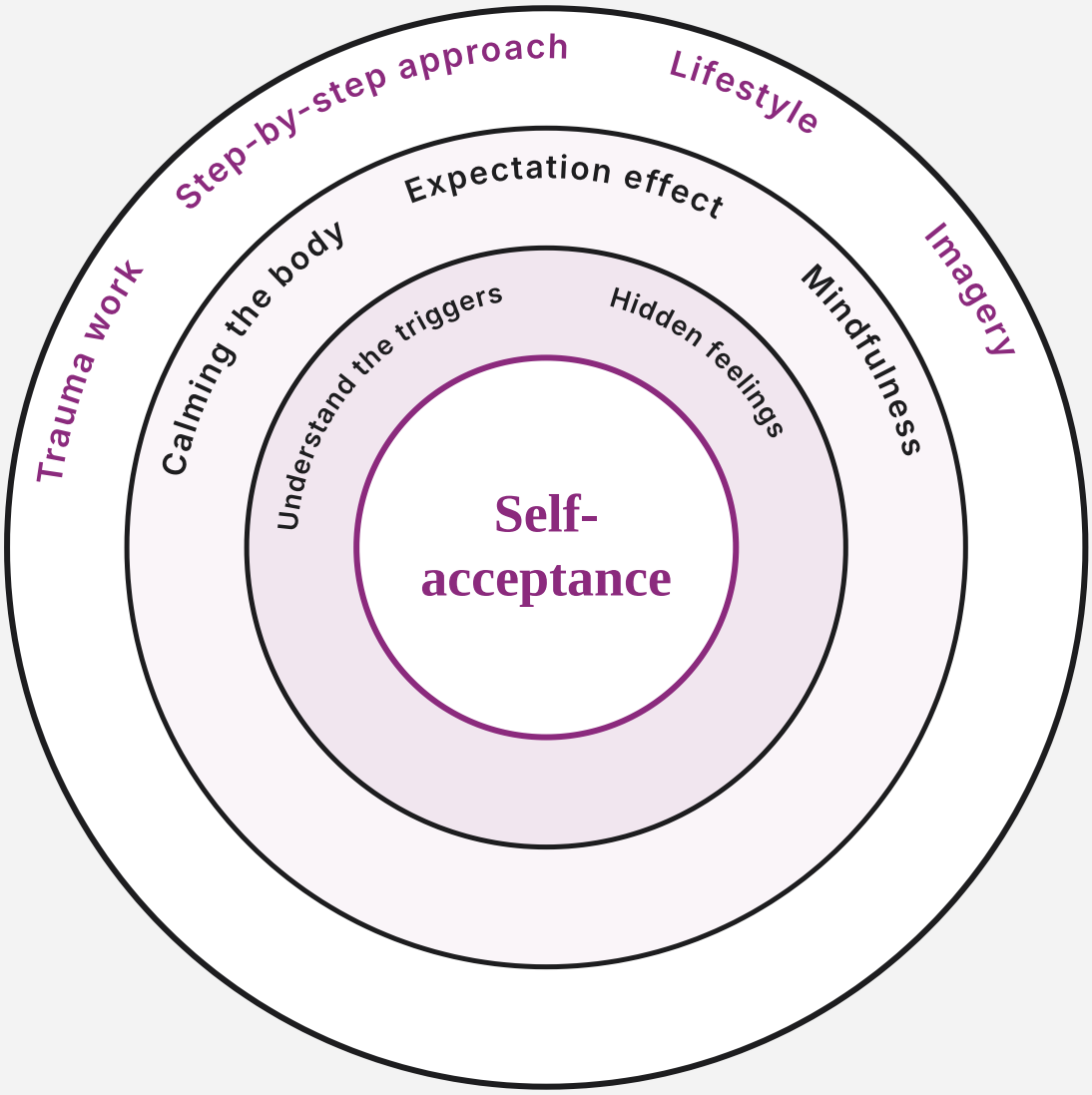
Choose the self-talk that best fits your language:

- "My body is getting me ready. This energy can help me."
- "I'm excited to..."
- "This feeling is uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous. It will pass."
- "I'm anxious because this matters to me."
- "I've felt like this before, and I got through it."
- "I can feel anxious and still do what matters to me."

See the steps you take towards what you fear as ways to widen your life, not as tests you might fail. See yourself as someone deserving of a full, free life, with or without anxiety coming along for the ride.



# Summary


Step-by-step approach
Lifestyle
Trauma work
Imagery
Expectation effect
Calming the body
Mindfulness
Understand the triggers
Hidden feelings
Self-acceptance

# Summary

- **Anxiety is your body's alarm system. It is trying to protect you, even when it gets it wrong.**
- **You can try several strategies to change your relationship with anxiety: calming the body, making room for the feeling and gradually returning to the things anxiety has taken from you.**
- **Avoidance and reassurance bring short-term relief but keep anxiety going. Small, planned steps towards what you fear help it fade.**
- **It is important to start from a place of self-acceptance. You can simultaneously accept the present and work towards emotional growth and change.**
- **If you are interested in accessing psychotherapy, you may start looking for a psychotherapist with training in a modality that you resonated with.**

## Thank you for reading!

I hope that you find these strategies helpful

I applied psychotherapy strategies in relation to anxiety, but the same coping strategies can be used widely in our day-to-day life

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# References and signposting

This ebook was written based on the knowledge accumulated in my training, clinical practice and teaching, and by reading and listening to various podcasts.

The EMDR, compassion-focused strategies, CBT, DBT and imagery were inspired by the respective training and therapy models. The ideas about acceptance/change dialectics and chain analysis are inspired by DBT (Dr Marsha Linehan). The CFT imagery exercises are inspired by "The Compassionate Mind" (Paul Gilbert).

The step-by-step approach (exposure), worry time and work on reassurance seeking and safety behaviours are core CBT strategies for anxiety. "I'm having the thought that..." comes from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT); Russ Harris's "The Happiness Trap" is an accessible introduction. The idea of "parts" comes from Internal Family Systems (IFS), developed by Richard Schwartz.

The triangle of anxiety and hidden feelings is adapted from David Malan's "triangle of conflict", from psychodynamic psychotherapy. The ideas about the impact of trauma and early life experiences on the present are derived from psychodynamic training and clinical experience.

About the concept of "the expectation effect", I heard from David Robson, from a BBC series with the same name, which is a summary of his book. The research on reframing anxiety as excitement and on stress mindset includes work by Alison Wood Brooks and Alia Crum.

I regularly listen to the "Feel Better Live More" podcast which indubitably influenced my thinking. Dr Rangan Chatterjee has also written about stress in "The Stress Solution".

Most of the strategies presented are used in the respective psychotherapies. This summary is original in the sense that I applied the therapy to anxiety, in a self-help way. As I have training in several modalities, it comprises multiple strategies.

## Where to find help in the UK

- **Your GP**, for assessment, treatment options and referral.
- **NHS Talking Therapies** offer CBT and other therapies for anxiety; in England, you can refer yourself.
- **Anxiety UK** and **Mind**, charities offering information and support.
- **EMDR Association UK**, directory of accredited EMDR therapists.
- **Urgent help:** NHS 111; Samaritans 116 123 (free, 24/7); in an emergency, 999 or A&E.