

Dealing with Anxiety



An anxious mind is a strong, powerful mind, and it will out-run, out-power and out-wit rationality and logic anytime. This booklet is about harnessing that strength and power and using it to work for you rather than against you.

ANXIETY

We all experience anxiety at some level. It's is a very normal response from a strong, healthy brain that thinks there might be trouble about and so instantly responds by making us stronger, faster, more powerful, more alert versions of ourselves.

But if the brain is **oversensitive** to threat, it will put us on high alert when there is no need for it. This is when anxiety becomes intrusive and difficult to live with. Our mind turns from being the gentle *security guard* who shows up in the background when needed, to being the *thug* who steals the joy from life, tells stories about nameless dangerous things, and seems to dominate our existence.

Anxiety is there to keep us safe. It's a call to action, either *fight or flight* so that we can move past perceived danger. It's there to keep us out of the way of trouble so the signals it sends have to be strong. The problem is that those signals aren't always based on reality. In fact, often, they are completely fictitious. They are all about things that might happen. Anxiety is instinctive and automatic. It was never meant to get in our way but was meant to move us out of the way of danger.

WHAT ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION TO?

Negative information is constantly being thrust upon us because our fear is worth \$billions. Fear marketing is a well-known sales technique and many individuals and organisations are using it extremely effectively. The media, companies, politicians, activists, lawyers, religious fanatics etc. are all feeding us fearful content in order to 'sell' their message.

Our fear is easy to manipulate because we're wired to respond to it. We are programmed to look for the negative and the fear so that we can protect ourselves from danger. Why are most of our thoughts and emotions negative and fearful? Because we were designed that way in order to survive. If someone can understand that situation then they can use it to manipulate and control us with a message of fear.

If you want to avoid feeding the fear inside your mind then stop watching the news, stop paying attention to the commercial marketing, ignore the politicians and activists etc. They're all trying to 'sell' you their **fear** message and listening to them will only make matters worse for you.

YOUR MIND IS STRONG. DON'T FIGHT IT.

The part of the brain that drives anxiety thinks it is doing the right thing by warning us of danger. The more we fight it, the harder it will work, to convince us that there's danger and that we need to act. We know that an anxious mind is a strong, powerful one so we shouldn't fight it. Instead we need to learn to greet anxiety like an old acquaintance who shows up out of the blue:

'Oh hi, I know you, you're my anxiety! Thanks for showing up and trying to help. Please take a seat over there and I'll be with you in a moment.'

LEARN TO MEDITATE.

What do we do if our computer has a glitch? We switch it off, leave it for a while, and then switch it back on. It's been said that meditation does a similar thing for the mind. It seems to re-boot our system and help us to rediscover a natural, easy relaxed way of thinking that leads us towards happiness.

Many people report that a few weeks after they have developed a regular practice of meditation they start to experience some relief from anxiety. Please don't think that meditation is a quick fix. One session of meditation won't turn your anxiety off. However, with regular practice, gradually you can gain some control over your anxious thoughts.

Meditation is both simple and easy to do but it's better to get some advice about it from someone who has been meditating for some time. There are many self help books and videos that can help too. Join a meditation or yoga class or take a course on mindfulness and learn the method that works best for you. You can get more information here:

www.johnshack.com/pause

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP WITH ANXIETY IMMEDIATELY?

We know that, over time, **meditation** helps us to build and strengthen our mind against anxiety. However there are other aspects of mindfulness that can be used **whilst anxiety is happening** to us that can help us to find peace.

With practice, these ideas can be called upon at will, to *turn down the volume* of our anxious thoughts, emotions and the disturbing physical sensations that anxiety often creates inside us.

Changing our mindset about anxiety involves small, repeated steps. Each step builds on the one before it, and it takes time to cement all these steps in place. Remember, your mind has been using its current practices for a while. It's developed certain thinking patterns and it will take time to un-learn those habits. It's going to take some convincing to show your mind that actually, it is **itself** the thing that's getting in the way!

Choose one of the following 8 strategies at a time, and use it for a short while to see how it works for you. If you try to do them all at once, there is the risk of it feeling *too hard* and you might want to run back to what's easy and familiar. The way around this is to go gently and use the power of your mind

as your greatest asset.

Remember: Anxiety is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness. If you suffer from anxiety, you've got a strong mind.

1. Be Present.

As often as you can be, be where you are, not where your mind wants you to be. Anxiety works by using 'what-ifs' and 'maybes' to push even the strongest, bravest person from a present that is always manageable and calm, to a potential future that feels uncertain and threatening.

We can counter this by staying fully present in the moment. You can anchor yourself in the present by opening up your senses and focusing on what you see, feel, hear, taste and smell right now. Stay with what is actually happening, rather than what might happen.

Spend this time fully experiencing the world around you and stay in the now. Every time you achieve this, you will be strengthening your ability to pull back from the anxious thoughts that try to steal you away. You'll also notice that the anxious thoughts and feelings lose their intensity when you learn to focus on the now.

Get into a regular routine of practicing of this technique each day, even when you're not feeling anxious. Try applying it to everyday tasks like washing your hands or climbing the stairs. When washing your hands focus on the feel of the water on your skin, the smell of the soap or the sound you make rubbing your hands together. When

climbing the stairs concentrate on the feeling you get when your feet touch the treads, the sound of your footfall or the things you notice about the staircase.

Whatever activity you choose, do it for 5 to 10 minutes every day. The brain strengthens and rewires with experience and practice and we are unlikely to achieve the result we are looking for overnight.

'Right now, I'm here in the present moment and I'm completely safe. I can see the people around me. I can feel the air on my skin, I can hear the sound my footsteps make.'

2. Take three Mindful breath.

When you start to feel anxious immediately stop what you are doing and take three mindful breaths, concentrating only on your breathing.

Breathing is something you carry with you everywhere you go. However you're not usually aware of it. It happens automatically rather than through us actually being involved in the process. Mindful breathing is when you **observe** your breathing as it happens. The most basic way to do this is simply to focus all your attention on the inhale and the exhale.

You can do this while standing, sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but many people find it easier to maintain mental focus if they close their eyes.

Sometimes, especially when trying to calm yourself in a stressful moment, it can help to start by taking a couple of exaggerated breaths. Start with a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and then a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). It's also useful to relax the body as you exhale and so it helps if you can practice this technique sitting or lying down.

After a few exaggerated breaths relax and simply **observe** each breath without trying to adjust or

control it. It may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or to be aware of the sensation of the air passing through your nostrils. As you do this, you'll probably find that your mind wanders, distracted by interruptions, thoughts or other body sensations. That's OK. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to the breath.

After three mindful breaths (which should only take 30 seconds), thinking only of the breathing, you should start to feel calmer, more relaxed and perhaps more in control of your thoughts and emotions. The negative sensations caused by your anxiety may well have reduced or even disappeared but don't worry if they don't go away immediately, the feeling of *more control* is what you're really looking for.

'No matter where I am or what I'm doing, I've always got 30 seconds just to breathe. When I do this I begin to regain control over my thoughts and feelings.'

3. Be an observer.

Stand back and observe your thoughts and feelings, they are separate from **the real you**. Watch them and know that they will eventually pass.

Anxiety can draw you in and engage you with every thought. Sometimes we need to engage with our thoughts and feelings, but most times we just need to observe them and wait for them move on.

Imagine your thoughts and feelings as soap bubbles. Watch them appear, watch them float by, and then see them disappear. Experiment with letting them be, without needing to change them, understand them, or rid yourself of them. Imagine them hovering in the air around you without becoming a part of you. Then, when they're ready to go, let them float away.

By adopting this habit we are learning to approach our anxiety in a new way. Rather than standing in the middle of a thunderstorm, trying to change the strength or direction of the wind and rain, you are watching that storm through a window. You're warm, dry and safe inside and you're feeling relaxed and happy because you know the storm will soon pass.

*'There's a thought about what might happen if
..... Look at that. Wow isn't that interesting. Oh
it's gone now, replaced by a thought about*

4. Be patient.

There is no instant cure for anxiety, it will take a little time to re-wire your mind. Keep telling yourself that 'like everything else this experience will pass'.

Anxious thoughts and feelings will come, they'll stay for a while and then they'll go. No thought or feeling remains with us forever. Be patient and know that whatever you're feeling, or thinking, right now, it will pass.

Experiment with the idea of being fully present, without needing to push away any thoughts or feelings. There is no anxious feeling and no anxious thought that is stronger than you are. However big they appear, however much it feels like they're in control, **you** will always be stronger and more resilient. All you have to do is relax, observe the thoughts and emotions and wait for them to go away.

Be open and curious about the feelings. See what happens when your anxious thoughts and feelings eventually leave. **Don't fight them**, let them stay around for long enough to realise that you have no need for them today.

'Ah there's an anxious thought. That's my mind trying to help me and that's OK. Please just leave when you're ready.'

5. Trust your mind.

Your mind wouldn't hurt you. In fact it's creating anxiety to try and protect you!

Anxiety can feel awful. The physical sensations are often extremely uncomfortable and they make no sense either. A curious, strong, thoughtful mind will try to put those feelings and thoughts into context, because the idea that they are *free-floating* and not attached to anything, can feel even worse.

You might find yourself wondering if your physical symptoms are a sign of something more serious. You might wonder if that *bad feeling* means something bad is going to happen. You might start worrying about the worrying (quite common with anxiety). You might find yourself wondering *what's driving all of this and how can I stop it?*

We must learn to trust our anxiety. Your mind is trying to protect you (although most of the time it's got the wrong idea). Trusting the anxiety can initially be difficult but the more you practice, the stronger you will become. Stronger at not believing the messages that your thoughts and feelings are telling you.

Thought are just thoughts, they're not right or wrong, they're not good or bad. They are just thoughts and of themselves have little or no value.

Anxiety is there as a warning, not as a prediction of things that are going to happen. Feel the security and safety of what your mind is trying to do for you.

'My heart is pounding and I'm feeling worried! Oh yes, I remember now, this is anxiety. It's not a symptom of something bigger and it's not a sign that disaster is just around the corner. I'm perfectly safe exactly where I am and this feeling will pass.'

6. Believe in yourself

You're strong and resourceful. You will cope with this problem, you always have and you always will!

Underneath all worry, anxiety and stress is **fear**. Fear that we won't be able to cope. The fear of failure is actually fear that you won't be able to cope with any failure that may occur. Fear of rejection is a fear that you won't be able to cope if you receive rejection from someone. It's the same for the fear of making the wrong decision, the fear of making a mistake, fear of public speaking, fear of the dentist etc.

Whatever happens, remember **you can deal with it**. This might not feel real for you at first, and that's OK. Go with it and see what the experience gives you. This is a learning process and it will take time.

But remember you will cope, you've proven it over and over again. See what happens when you move towards trusting that. Just keep telling yourself that you've always coped in the past and you'll be able to cope now.

'Whatever happens, I'm strong and I will cope. I always have and I always will.'

7. Accept what is.

Embrace your anxiety as it is, without needing it to be different or without **you** needing to change.

The more we try to change something the more energy we give it, and the more it stays the same. If you tell yourself **not to think of pink elephants** and try really hard not to think of them, what happens?

Anxious thoughts take up a lot of precious head space. They draw on our feelings, thoughts and imagination. The more we try to understand them, fight them or control them, the more oxygen we feed to our anxiety.

Instead, just try being with your anxiety as it is, without needing to change it. Acceptance isn't saying that everything is OK and it won't encourage thoughts and feelings to become stronger, it just stops giving them energy.

What you focus on is what becomes powerful. The more you focus on something, the more it flourishes and expands. Try to be with your anxiety without pushing against it. Don't fight it, force it to leave or to be different than it is. This process will help you understand your anxiety more and bring it out of the dark and into a space where you can better cope with it.

This approach isn't easy, but it's extremely powerful. Try it in small steps or for a small amount of time and work up. Start by letting small anxious feelings stay as they are, sit with them without needing them to be different. See how this feels, then when you're ready, work on other more powerful thoughts.

'Oh look, I'm having an anxious thought. My hands are clammy, my heart is beating fast, my mouth is dry. This is how anxiety feels to me today, and that's okay.'

8. Surrender and relax.

Stop trying to control things. Let go of the need for certainty. Learn to love the idea that you don't know what's going to happen next!

The future is always uncertain for everyone, so anxiety has a pretty easy time of causing a stir. Not everything will go to plan and that's OK, but the more we try to control things, the worse things will get. When you eventually embrace uncertainty, you'll start to see how little control over our lives we actually have.

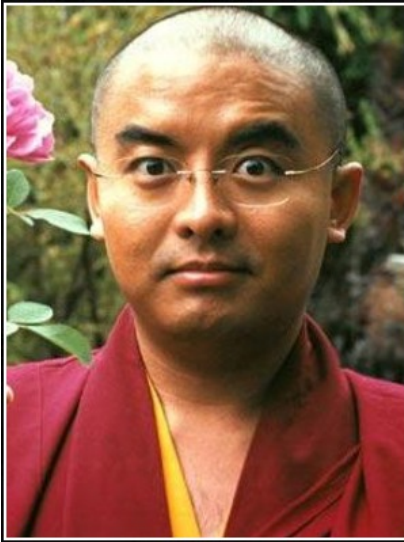
This idea may feel uncomfortable at first, so start with surrendering to the uncertainty of small things. Start by accepting that you have no control over the traffic or the weather and see how that feels. Then move onto more difficult things like someone imposing time constraints on you, or people interrupting you. Experiment with letting go of the need to control a situation or person. The more you are able to embrace uncertainty and tolerate it, the less power it will have over you.

'I don't know what will happen and that's OK. I'm not in control of what's happening or of other people's actions. In fact it's a little bit exciting NOT knowing what's going to happen next.'

Think of these 8 strategies like drops in a bucket. The first time you try them, you might not notice much difference. Same with the second time, and probably the third time. Eventually though, the more you experiment with them and the more you use them, the more change you'll notice and the more capacity you will have to harness the strength of your wild and beautiful mind and make it work in your favour.

You'll learn that you will always have what it takes and that anxiety is a feeling that comes and goes, just like a bad weather day.

Remember: You're a fighter, you've been fighting and winning for a while now. You're strong, brave and resilient and you have everything you need inside to deal with anything that might stand in your way. And this includes anxiety.



If you don't try to stop whatever is going on in your mind, but merely observe it, eventually you'll begin to feel a tremendous sense of relaxation, a vast sense of openness within your mind - which is in fact your natural mind, the naturally unperturbed background against which various thoughts come and go.

— *Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche* —

AZ QUOTES

John Shackleton.

For more information call 09 294 8570 or go to
www.johnshack.com