

THE ANXIETY WORKBOOK



*Understanding what your
anxiety is trying to tell you —
and how to work with it rather
than against it*

This workbook is an invitation
to get curious about your anxiety —
not to fight it, but to finally
understand it.



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A note from me to you

If you are reading this workbook, chances are anxiety has been costing you something.

Perhaps it has been waking you at 3am, tightening around your chest in meetings, or pulling you into rehearsals of conversations that haven't happened yet. Perhaps it has been following you into work, relationships, parenting, or the quiet moments when everything should feel like it might settle, but doesn't. Perhaps you are simply exhausted from carrying a mind that never seems to switch off.

If any of that feels familiar, I want you to know that you are not alone.

Over more than twenty years as a psychologist, I have worked with many clients whose lives had gradually become organised around anxiety. High-functioning people who, from the outside, seemed to have everything together, yet privately lived with constant worry, overthinking, self-doubt, and an exhausting need to anticipate every possible outcome. Many had come to believe that anxiety was simply part of their personality, rather than something that could shift.

I have also come to know anxiety personally, not just professionally.

There have been times in my own life when anxiety became so loud that it narrowed my world completely. Times when I woke in the night already caught in thought loops about problems that had not yet happened. Times when my mind searched the past for certainty about the future: it didn't work out then, so why would it work now? Or equally, things have gone well so far, but what if that changes?

I know the exhaustion of trying to think your way into safety. I know how quickly life can shrink when the mind is constantly scanning ahead, trying to predict, prevent, and prepare. And I know how convincing anxiety can feel when it tells you that this level of vigilance is necessary.

Which is why I want to start with something that might surprise you:

Anxiety is not the enemy.

I realise that may not be what you were hoping to hear. When anxiety is waking you at night, tightening your chest in meetings, or pulling you into rehearsals of conversations that haven't happened yet, the idea that it might be trying to help can feel far from your experience.

But understanding this one thing can begin to change your relationship with it.

For now, what matters most is this:

Anxiety is a signal. It is your nervous system's way of telling you that something feels uncertain, important, or potentially unsafe, and that some part of you is trying very hard to protect you.

The difficulty is not that the signal exists. The difficulty is that, for many of us, the signal becomes stuck. It becomes too loud, too frequent, and no longer well matched to what is actually happening in the present moment. And most of us were never taught how to relate to it when that happens.

Something I have come to recognise over the years is that anxiety is rarely only about the future itself. More often, it is about the nervous system trying to protect us from experiencing pain, disappointment, helplessness, shame, uncertainty, or loss again. It attempts to create certainty in a world where certainty can never fully exist. And while that strategy makes complete sense, it can slowly pull us away from the present moment and from our relationship with ourselves.

This workbook is not about learning how to suppress anxiety or force it into silence. It is an invitation to understand it more deeply. To begin to decode what it is actually trying to communicate. And from that understanding, to find a way of relating to it that is more sustainable, more compassionate, and ultimately more effective than anything that involves fighting yourself.

The exercises here are designed to help you slow down and get curious. Some will resonate immediately. Others may feel uncomfortable, or may not feel relevant yet. Trust that. Discomfort in this kind of work is often a signal worth paying attention to.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and complete it by hand, or use it as a framework for journaling alongside. Work through the sections in order if you can, since they build on each other. But if something pulls you immediately to a particular section, follow that instinct.

There are no right answers here. The goal is not to produce a polished analysis of yourself. The goal is honest, curious attention. Even a single sentence written carefully is worth more than a page written to impress.

- 01 What anxiety actually is, and why your brain produces it
- 02 The difference between helpful and unhelpful anxiety
- 03 How anxiety lives in the body
- 04 The patterns that keep anxiety going
- 05 Meeting yourself with compassion
- 06 Self-regulation tools that actually work
- 07 Finding the right level of support

Some of us work through a workbook like this in one sitting. Others return to it over days or weeks. Both are fine. This is yours. Use it at the pace that serves you.

SECTION 1

What anxiety actually is

And why your brain produces it

Before we go any further, I'd like to spend a little time talking about what anxiety actually is.

That might sound obvious, but one of the things I have noticed over the years is that many of us carry around explanations about anxiety that don't quite fit our experience. We've been told that we're overthinking, too sensitive, worrying unnecessarily, or simply need to learn to relax. While there may be a grain of truth in some of those ideas, they rarely tell the whole story.

And when we are working from an incomplete understanding, it becomes very difficult to know what will actually help.

So let's start with a simple but important idea:

Anxiety is not a flaw in you. It is not evidence that you are weak, incapable, or somehow broken. It is, in a very real sense, your nervous system doing exactly what nervous systems are designed to do.

We often use the words fear and anxiety interchangeably, but they are not quite the same thing.

Fear is a response to a clear and immediate threat. If a car suddenly swerves towards you, fear is what helps you react instantly. It belongs to the present moment. It says, "Something is wrong right now."

Anxiety is different.

Rather than responding to what is happening now, anxiety is concerned with what might happen next. It is your mind and nervous system trying to anticipate possible problems before they occur.

Fear says, "Something is wrong right now." Anxiety asks, "What if something goes wrong later?"

Neither response is inherently bad. In fact, both exist for good reasons.

The difficulty is that anxiety can become overactive. It can start treating possibilities as probabilities and uncertainties as dangers. When that happens, the mind begins scanning constantly for what could go wrong, and life can start to feel as though it is organised around preventing future problems.

At its core, anxiety is a survival mechanism, one of the oldest systems your brain possesses.

The challenge is that this system evolved in a very different world from the one we live in today.

Our ancestors needed to worry about predators, exposure to the elements, and immediate physical threats. Modern life presents a different set of challenges: overflowing inboxes, financial pressures, relationship difficulties, social judgement, uncertainty about the future, and an endless stream of information about things that could potentially go wrong.

Your nervous system responds to all of these through the same basic survival machinery.

What is happening when anxiety fires

You may already know the feeling. Your heart rate rises. Your breathing becomes shallower. Your stomach tightens. Your mind starts moving faster. Often, all of this happens before you have consciously decided there is anything to worry about. That is because anxiety begins in parts of the brain that are designed to respond quickly rather than accurately.

At the centre of this system is a small almond-shaped structure called the amygdala. Its job is not to analyse whether something is definitely dangerous. Its job is to detect possible threat and prepare the body to respond.

From an evolutionary perspective, this makes perfect sense. If our ancestors had paused to carefully evaluate every rustle in the bushes, they might not have survived long enough to pass on their genes.

The brain evolved to prioritise safety over accuracy. The difficulty is that the amygdala cannot always distinguish between a predator and an overflowing inbox, between physical danger and social embarrassment, or between a real threat and a difficult conversation.

It responds to perceived threat. And perception is shaped by memory, experience, and what the nervous system has learned over time, not just what is happening in the present moment.

So anxiety fires. And if temperament, experience, or early environment have taught you that the world is uncertain or unsafe, it may fire often.

Exercise 1 Your anxiety history

Beginning to notice

You might begin by turning your attention gently back to when you first remember feeling anxious. Not necessarily a dramatic moment, but the first time you noticed that particular feeling of dread, worry, or unease. As an example, waiting outside a door while parents argued, chest tight, not knowing whether to knock. You don't explain it, and notice that "not knowing what's coming" still trips your anxiety today.

What was happening

How old were you? What was happening in your life at the time? What did you learn, from that experience and the ones that followed, about whether the world was a safe or unsafe place?

Staying with it

There is no need to search for neat causality here. You might simply notice what arises as you stay with the question, however partial, unclear, or incomplete it feels.

This is not about finding a perfect explanation. It is about beginning to listen.

And sometimes, what we call anxiety in the present can feel like a younger part of us. A part that learned, at some point, that staying alert was the safest way to move through the world. Not because anything is wrong with that part. But because, at the time, it made sense.

This is honest reflection, not diagnosis. These patterns are not signs of weakness or failure. They are common responses to anxiety and uncertainty. Many of us develop them without ever realising it.

Exercise 2 What your anxiety has been trying to do

A different kind of question

Instead of asking what is wrong with your anxiety, try a different question:

What has it been trying to do for you? Even if it hasn't been very helpful, even if it's created more difficulty than it solved, there is usually some kind of protective intention underneath it. What might it have been trying to prevent? Or guard you against?

Listening with curiosity

You might also gently turn toward the anxious part of you and ask what are you most afraid might happen? What are you trying to protect me from?

There's no need to force an answer. Just notice what comes up when you ask, even if it's unclear, emotional, or only a sense in the background.

The aim isn't to analyse it. It's just to start listening.

SECTION 2

The difference between helpful and unhelpful anxiety

Not all anxiety is the same

One of the first things you may begin to notice, or be invited to notice, is that there is nothing wrong with feeling anxious. Anxiety isn't a sign that something is wrong with you. It isn't a flaw in your character or a failure of your mind. In fact, in the right moments and in the right amount, it has an important role to play. It's part of being human.

The intention here isn't to get rid of anxiety altogether, or to become someone who never feels it. That isn't realistic, and it isn't how a human nervous system works. There is a kind of anxiety that can actually be helpful.

You might notice it before something that matters: a presentation, a conversation you've been avoiding, an exam, a decision that carries weight. It can bring a certain sharpening of attention. A bit more energy. A sense of readiness, like something in you is quietly saying, "this matters, stay with this."

In those moments, anxiety is doing something useful. It helps you prepare. It helps you focus. It helps you show up. And often, once the moment has passed, it naturally begins to settle again. But there is also another kind of anxiety that can feel quite different. This is the kind that doesn't really switch off.

It lingers in the background, or it shows up when nothing obvious is happening. It can attach itself to "what if" thoughts that feel urgent and compelling in the moment, even though, right here, nothing is actually happening that requires your attention. It can pull you into imagined futures, or replayed scenarios, or a sense that something needs to be solved before you can feel okay.

And over time, without you necessarily choosing it, it can start to become part of the background tone of your life. It can influence the decisions you make, how you relate to others, and how much ease you can feel in your own body.

One of the more difficult things about anxiety is that, when it shows up, it always feels important. Your body doesn't pause and say, "this might not actually be urgent." It simply signals: pay attention. And so you do.

As you move through this workbook, you can begin to relate to anxiety a little differently. Not by fighting with it, and not by trying to force it away, but by creating a little more space around it.

You might start to gently notice yourself asking what is this anxiety responding to, right now? Is there something in this present moment that actually needs your attention? Or does this feel like something older being touched again? That small shift, asking whether this is happening now or whether it belongs to something familiar from before, can become a steady way of orienting yourself when anxiety shows up.

Exercise 3 Mapping your anxiety, helpful and unhelpful

Noticing what comes up

Start by bringing to mind the different situations in your life where you tend to feel anxious.

No need to analyse anything yet. Just notice what appears as you gently move your attention through your day-to-day life.

Where does anxiety show up most often for you?

A few gentle questions

For each situation that feels relevant, you might ask yourself:

- *Is this anxiety roughly in proportion to what's actually happening here?*
- *Does it settle once the situation is over, or does it tend to linger?*
- *Has it ever stopped you from doing something that, in hindsight, you probably would have been okay doing?*

What you are beginning to see

You're not trying to diagnose yourself. You're just starting to notice something more subtle:

Where anxiety is giving you useful information... and where it may have become overactive.

Where the alarm is still sounding, even when the situation has already passed.

Exercise 4 The old program

Noticing a pattern

You might start by noticing whether there's a pattern in what tends to trigger your more persistent anxiety. A certain type of situation. A particular relationship. A familiar kind of fear about how things might go. Just notice what shows up, without trying to analyse it too quickly.

Wondering where it came from

If you gently ask yourself where this pattern might have come from, without needing to be certain, what comes to mind? Is there a time in your life when this kind of response would have made sense?

When being alert, cautious, or anxious might actually have helped you in some way? Even if it doesn't quite fit your current life anymore, the system may still be responding as if it does.

A small example

You might notice anxiety before speaking in meetings. And when you look back, you realise there were times earlier in life where speaking up led to criticism or embarrassment. So now, your system reacts as if being visible still carries that same kind of risk, even when the present situation is very different.

A small inquiry

You might gently ask:

What are you trying to protect me from right now? And then just notice what comes: a word, a feeling, a memory, or nothing clear at all.

There's nothing you need to do with it. Just noticing is enough.

SECTION 3

How anxiety lives in the body

Why physical symptoms are real, not imagined

One of the more difficult aspects of anxiety is that it is not just something you think. It is something you feel in the body. The tight chest. The churning stomach. The sense of not quite being able to catch your breath. The racing heart. The tension, restlessness, or urge to move away from what is happening. The exhaustion that comes from being on alert for too long.

If you recognise this, it is important to pause and acknowledge something clearly: these experiences are real. They are not imagined, exaggerated, or a sign that you are overreacting. They are the body's response to a perceived threat. When the nervous system detects threat, whether physical or emotional, it activates a set of automatic responses designed to help you cope. Heart rate changes, breathing shifts, muscles tighten, digestion slows. The body prepares for action.

It does not always distinguish clearly between physical danger and emotional or psychological threat. This is part of why anxiety can feel so intense. It is not only happening "in thought." It is happening through the whole system. The physical symptoms of anxiety are not the problem themselves. They are information. And part of this work is learning, slowly, to relate to those signals differently, not as something to override or dismiss, but as something to begin listening to.

Exercise 5 Where does anxiety live in your body?

Beginning with the body

You might start by softening your gaze, or closing your eyes if that feels comfortable.

No need to rush this. Just give yourself a moment to arrive.

Bringing something to mind

When you're ready, bring to mind a situation that usually brings up anxiety for you. Not the most intense one, just something familiar. And notice what happens in your body as you do.

What you notice

Where do you feel it? What is the sensation like: tight, heavy, hot, hollow, buzzing, restless, or something else? Does it arrive quickly, or build more slowly?

You don't need to change anything. Just notice it as it is. If you can just take a moment to sit with the physical sensations of it as you breathe in and out gently and steadily. With each exhale relaxing your muscles to let go little.

Putting it into words

Now try writing it down in simple, concrete language, as if you were describing the physical experience to someone who has never felt it before.

What is actually happening in your body? Getting specific like this can be surprisingly settling. It gently shifts you from being inside the experience to noticing it, just enough to create a bit of space around it.

Exercise 6 When did you last feel at ease in your body?

A different kind of memory

Bring to mind a moment, recent or further back, when you felt genuinely at ease in your body.

Relaxed. Present. Not on guard. Where were you? What were you doing?

What was present

As you stay with that memory, notice what was there that supported that sense of ease. It might be something obvious, or something small. The light in the room. The absence of pressure. The company of someone. A sense of space or time not being rushed.

What this is really pointing to

In a way, this is less about the memory itself, and more about what it shows you. What does safety feel like in your body? This memory is a kind of reference point, not something to hold onto, but something that reminds you your system already knows how to settle. It has done it before.

SECTION 4

The patterns that keep anxiety going

Understanding catastrophising, avoidance, and reassurance-seeking

One of the most frustrating things about anxiety is that it often seems to take on a life of its own. You may have noticed this yourself. The thing you were worried about comes and goes, yet the anxiety remains. One worry is replaced by another. One problem gets solved and your mind quickly finds something else to focus on. It can leave you wondering why you still feel anxious when there is no obvious danger in front of you.

This is because anxiety is not only about what is happening around you. It is also about the patterns your mind and nervous system have developed in response to anxiety itself. Without realising it, many of us begin to respond to anxiety in ways that make perfect sense in the moment but unintentionally keep the cycle going. Understanding these patterns is not about blaming yourself. It is about recognising what anxiety has taught you to do so that you can begin to choose something different.

Catastrophising

Perhaps you know this feeling. Something uncomfortable happens and your mind immediately races ahead. A headache becomes a serious illness. A mistake at work becomes evidence that you are going to lose your job. A text message goes unanswered and suddenly you find yourself wondering whether the relationship is falling apart.

The shift can happen so quickly that it feels less like a thought and more like a certainty. By the time anxiety has finished telling the story, you are no longer dealing with what is actually happening. You are dealing with a future catastrophe that exists only in your imagination but feels completely real in your body.

If this sounds familiar, it is important to understand that catastrophising is not a sign of weakness or irrationality. It is often the result of a mind that learned, somewhere along the way, that bad things can happen unexpectedly and that staying alert is the safest option.

The problem is that anxiety treats possibility as probability. Because something could happen, it begins to feel as though it probably will happen. Living this way is exhausting. It keeps your nervous system in a state of constant anticipation, preparing for dangers that rarely arrive.

Avoidance

When something makes us anxious, avoiding it often feels like the most sensible thing in the world. You cancel the social event and immediately feel relieved. You put off making the phone call and the tension drops. You avoid the difficult conversation and, for a little while, things feel easier.

The relief is real. The problem is that your nervous system pays attention to what follows. Every time you avoid something and feel better, your brain quietly learns a lesson: "Good thing we escaped. That must have been dangerous." Over time, the list of things that feel threatening can begin to grow.

Avoidance is not always obvious. Sometimes it looks like staying busy so you never have to sit with your feelings. Sometimes it is endlessly researching a problem instead of acting. Sometimes it is checking your phone whenever there is a moment of silence, filling every gap with distraction so that anxiety never has a chance to be felt.

In the short term, avoidance reduces discomfort. In the long term, it often reduces confidence.

The difficult truth is that confidence is not built by avoiding what scares us. It is built by discovering, again and again, that we can survive what scares us.

Reassurance-seeking

When anxiety takes hold, reassurance can feel like a lifeline. You ask your partner if everything is okay. You message a friend for their opinion. You google your symptoms. You replay conversations looking for evidence that nothing is wrong. For a moment, it works. You feel calmer.

Then the anxiety returns. A little later you find yourself seeking reassurance again.

This is one of the reasons anxiety can become so repetitive. The relief that reassurance provides is real but temporary. The mind never quite learns that it can tolerate uncertainty because certainty keeps being supplied from the outside.

Over time, more and more reassurance is needed to achieve the same sense of safety. This is not because there is something wrong with you. It is because anxiety has convinced you that certainty is the answer. The difficulty is that certainty is something life rarely offers.

The deeper issue

Although catastrophising, avoidance, and reassurance-seeking look different on the surface, they are all trying to solve the same problem. They are attempts to escape uncertainty.

Anxiety desperately wants guarantees. It wants to know that nothing bad will happen, that everyone will be okay, that the future will unfold exactly as planned. But life cannot provide those guarantees.

The paradox is that the harder we fight uncertainty, the more frightening it becomes. The more we seek reassurance, control, and avoidance, the less able we feel to cope without them.

Recovery from anxiety is not about achieving certainty. It is about slowly discovering that you can live, function, and even thrive without it. Not because uncertainty becomes comfortable. But because you become stronger, steadier, and more trusting of your ability to handle whatever life brings.

Exercise 7 Which patterns do you recognise?

Looking honestly at your anxiety

As you read about catastrophising, avoidance, and reassurance-seeking, you may have found yourself recognising parts of your own experience. Perhaps one pattern stood out immediately. Perhaps you noticed all three.

Rather than judging yourself, see if you can approach these patterns with curiosity. They developed for a reason. At some point they helped you manage fear, uncertainty, or discomfort. The aim of this exercise is simply to begin noticing them more clearly.

Reflect on the following questions:

- *Which of these patterns do you recognise most strongly in yourself?*
- *What situations tend to trigger it?*
- *What do you usually do when anxiety shows up?*
- *How does the short-term relief feel in your body or mind?*
- *What is the longer-term cost of responding this way?*
- *If you did not rely on this pattern quite so heavily, what might become possible in your life?*

The goal is not to criticise yourself for having them. The goal is simply to notice them. Awareness is often the first step toward change.

Exercise 8 What have you been avoiding?

Gently exploring what anxiety asks you to move away from

Anxiety often tells us that avoidance is protection. It tells us not to make the phone call, have the conversation, attend the event, make the decision, or take the risk. In the moment, listening to anxiety can feel like the safest option. Yet many of us discover that the things we avoid continue to occupy space in our minds. What is pushed away rarely disappears completely.

Take a moment to reflect.

- Is there something you have been avoiding because it makes you anxious?
- Is there a conversation you have been putting off?
- A decision you know needs to be made?
- A situation you keep postponing?
- A feeling you have been trying not to feel?

Try to name it as specifically as you can. Then consider:

- What has avoiding this given me? What has it cost me?
- How has my life become smaller, more restricted, or more complicated because of this avoidance?
- What might I learn about myself if I took one small step toward it?
- What might become possible if anxiety was no longer making this decision for me?

The purpose of this exercise is simply to notice where anxiety may be shaping your choices. Sometimes change begins not with doing something different, but with seeing clearly what has been happening all along.

SECTION 5

Meeting yourself with compassion

The ground the tools stand on

Before we get into the tools in the next section, I want to pause on something that changes how well any of them actually work: the way we meet ourselves while we're using them.

Here's what I mean. Anxiety starts rising, and the first thing that happens is a flash of self-criticism. There you go again, why can't you just calm down. Now there are two things happening in the body at once: the anxiety itself, and the stress of being under attack from our own mind. Self-criticism activates the same threat system we talked about in Section 1. It doesn't calm the amygdala down. It gives it more to respond to.

This is why self-compassion isn't a soft add-on to this workbook. It's closer to the ground the rest of it stands on. The breathing, the grounding and the noticing all tend to work better from a place of presence and self-compassion than from a place of self-attack.

What self-compassion is not

It's worth clearing up a few misunderstandings, because they're often the reason self-compassion gets written off before it's really been tried.

It isn't self-pity. Self-pity narrows in on our own suffering and loses sight of everything else. Self-compassion holds our suffering as part of being human, not separate from it. It isn't self-indulgence, lowering our standards, or letting ourselves off the hook. And it isn't positive thinking. Repeating a kind phrase we don't believe usually just feels hollow, and sometimes it can even make things feel worse.

Self-compassion is simpler than any of that, and in some ways harder. It's the willingness to be on our own side while we're struggling, to offer ourselves something close to the basic decency we'd offer someone we loved, without having to think about it.

Most of us can already imagine doing that for a friend. The two exercises below are really just practice at turning it inward, so that by the time we reach the tools in Section 6, we're meeting ourselves as an ally, not a critic.

It will be of real benefit to carry this sense of self-compassion with you into the exercises that follow. You'll likely find them easier when you're not also fighting yourself.

Exercise 9 The self-compassion break

A short practice for hard moments

This is a practice I come back to again and again, both in my own life and in the room with the people I work with. It only takes about a minute, but it can genuinely shift something, even in a hard moment. It's worth having ready before you need it.

Step 1: Name it

When you notice you're struggling, pause and say to yourself, silently or out loud: "This is a moment of difficulty." Or simply: "This is hard right now."

Step 2: Remember you're not alone in this

Struggle is part of being human. Anxiety, in particular, is something almost everyone carries in some form, even when it doesn't show on the outside. You are not the only person who has felt this.

Step 3: Offer yourself something kind

This might be a hand on your chest, or wherever feels most natural. It might be a phrase: "May I be kind to myself." "May I give myself what I need right now."

There's no one right way to do this. The aim is just to interrupt the automatic self-criticism, even briefly, and offer something closer to how you'd treat someone you cared about.

Exercise 10 Writing to yourself the way you'd write to someone you love

A different voice

Think of someone you care about: a friend, a child, someone you'd naturally be gentle with if they were struggling the way you sometimes do. If they came to you anxious, self-critical, exhausted from trying to manage everything in their head, what would you actually say to them?

Not the advice you'd give, but the tone underneath it.

Try writing a few lines to yourself, in that voice, about whatever you're carrying right now. It can feel strange at first. Many of us notice a pull to make it more critical, more "realistic." See if you can let it stay kind anyway, even if it feels unfamiliar.

You don't have to believe every word yet. You're just practising a different way of speaking to yourself. Like anything, it tends to get more natural with repetition.

SECTION 6

Self-regulation tools that actually work

What do you do when anxiety arrives?

When anxiety shows up, it can feel immediate and overwhelming.

This section isn't about analysing it. It's just a few simple ways to respond in the moment, ways that help you create a bit more space inside the experience. Try to bring the same self-compassion from Section 5 into how you use them. If a tool doesn't work perfectly, or you forget to reach for it in the moment, that's not failure. It's practice. You're allowed to be a beginner at this.

Not to get rid of anxiety, but to steady yourself within it. Below are five things to try in the moment, described simply rather than boxed into separate exercises. Pick whichever fits what you're feeling. At the end, there's one exercise to help you turn whichever one resonates into an actual, repeatable practice.

When Anxiety Takes Your Breath Away

One of the first things anxiety affects is breathing. It might feel tight, shallow, or like you can't quite get a full breath in. Rather than trying to force yourself to calm down, you can gently interrupt what's happening in the body.

Try this, sometimes called a physiological sigh. Two short breaths in through the nose, then one long, slow exhale out through the mouth. A few rounds of that. The longer exhale helps signal to your system that you're safe enough right now, not to switch anxiety off, just to take the edge off it.

As you breathe, notice where the anxiety lives in your body. Let yourself be aware of the physical sensations as you experience them, without judgement and without resistance.

This may feel challenging. Intuitively we want to run away from anxiety, either by avoiding it or resisting it, but that's often what creates the suffering, wanting reality to be different than it is. The more we can gently lean in with our breath, the easier it gets. It's about meeting our own experience with empathy, being with what is rather than fighting it. If your mind tries to pull your attention away, simply notice that, and bring yourself back to the breath, and to the place where the anxiety lives.

I had a revelation about this once, at a yoga retreat, during a yin class. The more I leaned in and yielded to the discomfort of the pose, the more relaxed my body became. Anxiety works the same way. The more you accept what's there, not by swimming around in it but by witnessing it, the more it becomes able to move and release. So as the anxiety shows up in your body, stay with it gently. Just notice the sensations, breath in, breath out.

When your mind is racing ahead

Anxiety has a way of pulling you out of the present and into the future, into all the “what ifs.”

To bring yourself back, use your senses:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Go slowly. Be specific if you can. Not just “a chair,” but the texture of it. Not just “a sound,” but where it’s coming from. This isn’t about pushing thoughts away. It’s about coming back to what’s actually here.

When anxiety starts telling stories

Anxiety often speaks like it’s certain this will go wrong... I can’t cope... something isn’t okay.

Instead of getting into a debate with those thoughts, try just noticing them:

“I’m having the thought that I can’t cope.” “I notice my mind is telling me something will go wrong.”

That small shift matters. You’re not inside the thought anymore. You’re the one noticing it. And that changes your relationship to it.

When your body is carrying the anxiety

Anxiety isn’t just in the mind. It shows up in the body too: tension, restlessness, urgency. Sometimes what helps most is movement. A walk. Stretching. Cleaning. Anything simple that lets the body discharge some of that activation. Often, after moving, things feel a bit more manageable, not because the situation has changed, but because your system has settled slightly.

When Anxiety Feels Overwhelming (A Different Way of Meeting It)

Sometimes it helps to meet anxiety a little differently, not as something to fight, but as something that’s happening inside you. You might even imagine it as a younger, more frightened part of you. Not literally a child, just something that feels that vulnerable, that on edge.

See if you can find where it lives in your body right now. It might be a tightness in your chest, a knot in your stomach, a held breath, a tension in your shoulders. Wherever it is, let yourself notice it there.

You might place a warm hand there, gently, the way you’d rest a hand on a child who was frightened. Let your breath move in and out underneath it, slow and easy, nothing forced. You don’t have to do much with that. No fixing, no analysing. Just a bit of steadiness alongside it.

If this feels familiar, that’s because it is. It’s close to the self-compassion break from Section 5, just applied in the moment, while anxiety is actually here.

"I can see you're scared." "I'm here with you." Notice how that feels. Notice if anything shifts, even slightly, whatever that shift is for you. Then, when you're ready, come back to whatever is in front of you, your breath, your body, the room you're in.

Learning to live with not-knowing

At the heart of anxiety is often a struggle with uncertainty. The mind wants certainty. It wants to know what will happen and how to stay safe. But life doesn't really offer guarantees. So part of this work is learning to tolerate not-knowing without immediately trying to fix it.

Not checking. Not reassurance-seeking. Not over-preparing. Just staying with it a little longer than feels comfortable. And noticing, over time, that you can actually do that. You can feel uncertain... and still be okay.

Exercise 11 Your anxiety in a wider context

Stepping back

Anxiety doesn't usually show up randomly. If you pause for a moment, you might start to notice patterns. Certain situations. Certain relationships. Certain areas of life where anxiety tends to appear more often. Where does yours seem to show up most?

What the pattern might be pointing to

It can be helpful to gently ask what does this seem to be connected to in my life? Often, anxiety gathers around the things that matter most to us: relationships, work, identity, responsibility, belonging. The places where there is something meaningful at stake. In that sense, anxiety is not meaningless. It is often tied to care, investment, and vulnerability.

A question to sit with

Is there a way to stay connected to what matters to you... without needing anxiety to do all the talking? You put some immediate thoughts below but sit with this question. You don't need to answer that right now.

SECTION 7

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

One of the most unhelpful ideas in mental health is that you only seek support when things are “bad enough.” I want to gently challenge that. Because I’ve seen many people spend a long time trying to manage anxiety on their own. Not because they weren’t struggling, and not because support wouldn’t have helped, but because they weren’t sure they were allowed to ask for it yet.

You don’t need to be in crisis to reach out. You don’t need a diagnosis. And you don’t need to wait until you’ve “tried everything.” If anxiety is taking up space in your life, in your sleep, your relationships, or your ability to feel present, that is enough reason to consider getting support.

What you can do on your own

Self-directed work can make a real difference. Not as a substitute for “proper help,” but as meaningful work in its own right. Noticing your patterns, learning to respond differently, and practising steadier ways of relating to anxiety can gradually shift how much space it takes up.

Some of the most important basics matter more than we realise. Movement helps regulate the nervous system. Sleep affects everything: mood, reactivity, and resilience. And reducing overall load often helps more than adding more coping strategies.

Even simple reflection can take the intensity down a notch: writing things down, naming what you feel, making sense of your experience. Sometimes just putting something into words changes how heavy it feels.

When therapy becomes helpful

Sometimes you can see your patterns clearly, and still feel stuck in them. That’s often where therapy becomes useful. Not because you need someone to “fix” you, but because certain patterns shift more easily in relationship with another person, especially when they’ve been shaped in relationship in the first place. In a good therapy space, something different is offered: steadiness, attention, and a relationship that isn’t based on judgement or pressure to change. Over time, that experience can begin to change how you relate to yourself.

Different approaches help in different ways. One type of clinical approach called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) focuses on thoughts, behaviours, and practical tools for change. Acceptance Commitment Therapy (another clinical approach) helps you build a different relationship with difficult thoughts and feelings, rather than trying to eliminate them. While Internal Family Systems (yet another approach we use in the clinic) works with different “parts” of you, including the anxious parts, with curiosity rather than conflict. And body-based or trauma-informed approaches can be helpful when anxiety is tied to earlier

experiences that are held more in the body than in words. What matters most is not the therapeutic approach or model, but whether you feel safe enough and understood enough in the process.

When more support is needed

Sometimes anxiety becomes more intense than what self-work or therapy alone can comfortably hold. When that happens, it can be important to widen the support around you, sometimes including medical or psychiatric care alongside psychological work. This isn't about labelling your experience. It's about making sure you're not carrying it alone.

A simple way to think about it

There isn't a perfect rule for when to seek support. But here's a simple way to orient yourself:

- Self-directed work can help when things are manageable and you're building awareness
- Therapy can help when patterns feel stuck or repetitive, even with insight
- Medical or psychiatric support can help when symptoms are overwhelming or disruptive

You don't have to be certain before reaching out. Often, the first step is just a conversation with someone who can help you figure out what level of support makes sense and perhaps the most important thing to remember is that you don't need to wait until things are at their worst to deserve support.

Exercise 12 Building your regulation practice, your closing plan

Choosing something specific

From the tools above, see if you can notice which one feels most relevant for you right now. Not in theory, but in your actual day-to-day experience. Where does your anxiety tend to show up most? In your body? In your thoughts? In patterns like avoidance or overthinking? Just start there.

Making it concrete

Now choose one tool to experiment with this week. The more specific you can make it, the more useful it becomes. For example, not “I’ll use breathing more,” but something like: “When I notice my shoulders tightening before I check my phone in the morning, I’ll pause and do three physiological sighs first.” Small. Real. Linked to a moment that actually happens.

It doesn’t need to be perfect. It just needs to be usable.

Writing your plan

Write your plan somewhere you can see it. Keep it simple and specific enough that you could actually do it in the moment. This isn’t a commitment to do it perfectly. It’s just a way of making your intention clearer, so you have a better chance of catching yourself when anxiety shows up

Nothing to write here but use the space below to reflect on the approach you think might work best for you.

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About Me

That's really the last thing I wanted to say to you directly. I hope this has all been helpful. What follows is a little about me, in case it's useful to know who's been sitting with you through these pages.

I'm a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. I've lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and work with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, I had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped my understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

My approach

My approach is integrative, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. I don't apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. I work with individuals, couples, and families. My particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

My background

- MSc Counselling Psychology, United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma, Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa and the United States

Get in touch

If, at some point, you feel like you would like to talk to me directly, I offer a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and understand what working together might look like. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. You can reach me by email at shelagh.psychologist@gmail.com , or by WhatsApp on +60 17-358 2563.

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This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human, each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

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Anxiety is trying to tell you something. *This workbook will help you listen.*



When we stop fighting our anxiety and start to understand it, it can become a powerful guide. This workbook offers a compassionate, practical approach to help you explore the messages behind your anxiety and build a more supportive relationship with yourself.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  Insightful explanations about anxiety and how it works
-  Thought-provoking prompts and reflective exercises
-  Tools to help you respond with curiosity and compassion
-  Space to explore, journal, and grow at your own pace
-  Gentle guidance to help you feel more grounded, empowered, and connected



The goal isn't to be free of anxiety, but to understand it. When you do, you can begin to move forward with more clarity and self-trust.



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

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20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate anxiety, stress, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.



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