

The background of the cover is a watercolor illustration of waves. The colors range from light blue to deep purple, with soft, blended edges. The waves are depicted in a stylized, flowing manner, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall aesthetic is calm and artistic.

# More Than Okay

## A Guidebook for Preventing and Managing Everyday Anxiety

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Dear Reader,

My name is Diane Lasher-Penti. I am a licensed marriage and family therapist and the Town of Ellington Youth Services Director. I have worked with children and adolescents in our community for over 15 years.

I created this book with the goal of helping you identify, prevent, and manage any of the normal anxiety you might experience in your daily life. Why? Because when you're overwhelmed, stressed, and worried, life's challenges become difficult to face, and life becomes less enjoyable. And though it might not be possible to enjoy every second of your life, I do want you to enjoy as much of it as possible. That way, you can be the best version of "you," and your world can benefit in the process.

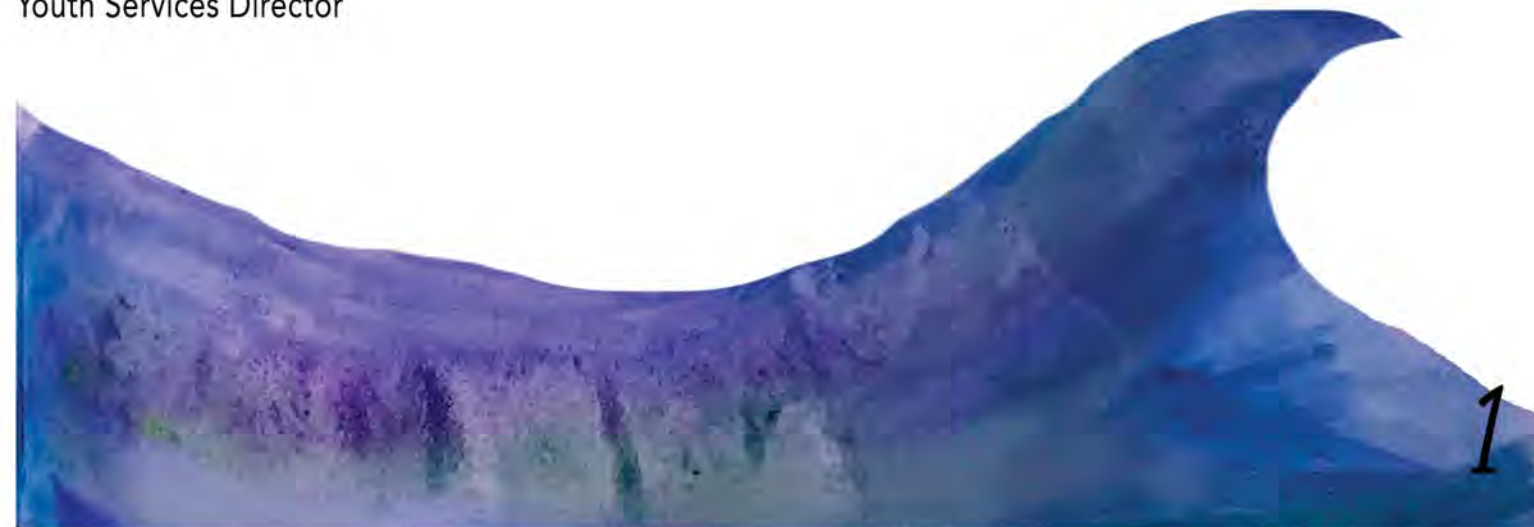
In this book, you will find:

- 1) A general overview of what anxiety is, why it exists, and the different ways it can manifest.
- 2) Anxiety-related tips and techniques you can implement immediately.
- 3) Resources should you wish to seek additional help on your mental health journey.

This book is neither meant to replace traditional counseling or therapy, nor to serve as a cure-all for something each of us lives with to varying degrees every day. Rather, I've put this together in hopes that, should you identify with any of the examples or scenarios you encounter within these pages, you leave feeling empowered—and well-equipped—to begin making small changes in your life today.

I believe in you. I am with you. Thank you for being here with me.

Diane Lasher-Penti, LMFT  
Youth Services Director



# Anxiety

## What is it? How does it manifest?

When is the last time you heard the word anxiety? My guess is, if you've been keeping your ears open, you've heard it quite a bit recently. You may have heard it sometime today. Conversations regarding mental health have been taking place more often lately. This is great, and necessary! Sometimes, though, these conversations can leave us feeling a bit confused, because words like anxiety have lots of meanings. And we don't always use them properly. And even if we do use them properly, we might not really know what we're saying.

So, let's dispel the mystery.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is your body's natural response to stress. The stress can be internal, like an unsettling memory, or external, like a difficult exam. Sometimes it's easy to identify what the stress is, but other times? Well, you might just feel a bit...wacky. You can thank your amygdala for this.

The amygdala is the part of the brain involved with experiencing emotions. One of its main functions is to keep you safe by recognizing and responding to danger. Say you're on a hike with your friends and you see a bear. Or you're driving down a busy street and a car swerves into your lane. Your amygdala is going to fire.

This is a good thing! Your amygdala is a powerful survival tool. When it senses danger, it immediately—and automatically—surges your body with the oxygen, hormones, and adrenalin it needs to either run from the danger or fight it.

Sometimes, though, the amygdala gets a bit trigger happy with the panic button and fuels your body when there's no real danger. Without the need to run or fight, the fuel builds and builds and you're left feeling...

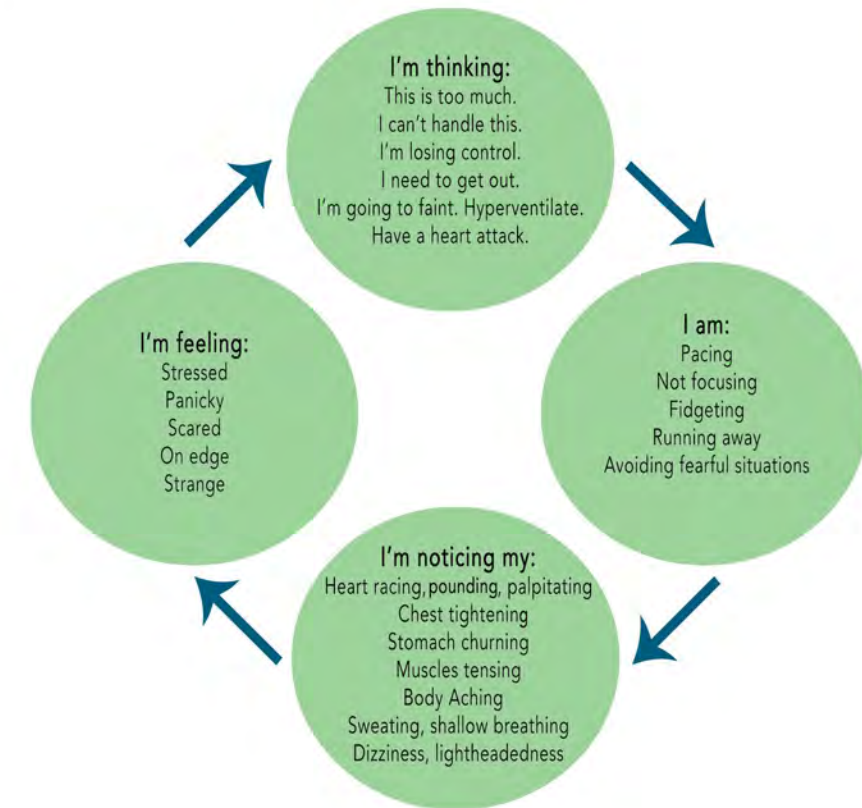
Anxious.

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## How does anxiety manifest?

Anxiety can manifest in many ways. It affects our thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, and behaviors, all of which affect each other. It's important for you to understand what might happen when you experience anxiety so you can recognize your symptoms and avoid getting caught in a vicious anxiety cycle.



So, you identify with something in one of those lists. Maybe even more than one. You worry constantly. Your muscles are always tense. Your stomach feels queasy at least once a week. You avoid crowds, or elevators, or clowns, or dogs. You sweat more than you would like to admit.

I'll let you in on a secret:

So do I. So does everyone!

Being a person is hard. Life is messy, and confusing, and—let's face it—quite the anxiety-inducing situation.

So instead of shaming ourselves for experiencing anxiety, let's focus on the myriad ways we can prevent and manage it. On the next page, we'll start with a few of the basics.

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# Nutrition

Food is fuel. What you eat (and drink) directly impacts your brain and body. And, considering anxiety is experienced in the brain and body, that means food has something to do with it. While your diet doesn't necessarily "cause" anxiety, and therefore won't "cure" it, it will affect the way you feel. And you want to feel good, right? We all do. So, let's take a look at foods that have been proven to exacerbate anxiety symptoms so we can eat a bit less of those, and foods that have been proven to reduce anxiety symptoms so we can up our consumption of those. We'll start with the DOs, because "do" diets are more fun than "don't" diets, and because the DOs are delicious.

## FRESH FRUITS

Your body needs carbs and sugar. Fresh fruits provide the type of carbs and sugars your body loves because it can easily convert them into energy.

## VEGETABLES

Vegetables are loaded with fiber and vitamins, all of which are good for our brains. Vitamin B, for example, promotes healthy nerves and brain cells. Feelings of anxiety may be rooted in a Vitamin B deficiency.

## WHOLE GRAINS

Complex carbs boost the brain-calming chemical, serotonin. Select whole grain breads and cereals over those with white flour and refined sugars.

## WATER

Eight cups a day keeps the dehydration away. Dehydration leads to anxiety. Fill up your cup!

## ANTIOXIDANT-RICH FOODS

Anxiety is thought to be correlated with a lower overall antioxidant state, which means eating foods rich in antioxidants, like beans, nuts, berries, and leafy greens, is a good move.

## TRYPTOPHAN-RICH FOODS

Foods rich in tryptophan have a natural relaxation component, and the more we can relax, the better we're going to feel. Oats, soy, poultry, eggs, and sesame seeds are examples of these.

## MAGNESIUM-RICH FOODS

More than 25% of the population is magnesium deficient. Research shows magnesium helps people feel calm. Let's refill those stores if they've been depleted! Leafy greens like spinach and chard are great diet additions. So are legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains.

## OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

Studies have proven omega-3 fatty acids to be beneficial in combating anxiety and depression. Try eating fatty fish, like salmon, sprinkle flax seed in a smoothie or on your salad, or add a winter squash to your vegetable medley.



Now, onto the DON'Ts (or the IN MODERATIONS)

## FRIED FOODS

Burgers, fries, donuts, mozzarella sticks—let's be real. They're tasty. Sometimes our bodies crave them, and it's ok to honor those cravings. But the more we keep our fried food indulgences to a minimum, the better we're going to feel. Fried foods are difficult to digest, have little nutritional content, and contribute to heart issues. Happy gut + happy heart = less anxious mind.

## ALCOHOL

It's easy when we're anxious to reach for something we think will take the edge off. But the truth is, sometimes those things add to the edge. Alcohol dehydrates you, throws off your hormone balance, and can cause physical symptoms from toxins that trigger panic attacks.

## COFFEE

Coffee is a stimulant, which means for those of us with an overactive amygdala, drinking three cups a day probably wouldn't be the best decision. It will ramp up your heartrate and make you shake, which might lead to a panic attack. If you notice drinking even a little bit of coffee gives you the jitters, try herbal tea instead. Or water!

## DAIRY PRODUCTS

Dairy heightens your adrenalin levels. Adrenaline kicks in during fight or flight. That means eating too much dairy can get you into panic mode when you aren't in a dangerous situation. Try ordering one scoop of ice cream instead of two, and sprinkling cheese on your salad instead of eating the whole wheel.

## REFINED SUGARS

You know how I said the sugar in fruit is good for you? It is. That's because it's naturally-occurring. White sugar, on the other hand? The type of sugar you find in cookies, cupcakes, cereals, breads—it's not the greatest. Refined sugars can cause blurry vision, difficulty thinking, shakiness, and fatigue, all of which may be interpreted as signs of a panic attack, thereby increasing worry and fear.



# Sleep

Sleep plays a vital role in your mental and physical health. It gives the body's cells and neurons a chance to shut down and repair themselves.

It can be difficult to sleep when you're feeling anxious about something going on in your life, or when you're overwhelmed with a seemingly never-ending to do list. You lie in bed, close your eyes, and the thoughts come racing. Before you know it, it's 3 a.m. You have to be at school or work by 7, and you're sure to be drowsy all day.

We've all been there.

Unfortunately, sleep deprivation acts as a chronic stressor that impairs brain function and contributes to an overload on the body's system, which can lead to memory loss, confusion, and depression. Additionally, it creates a hormone imbalance and boosts adrenaline levels in your body, which can drive anxiety even higher. So it's vital for us to break the sleep-anxiety cycle.

Here are some techniques you can implement to help you get those eight rejuvenating hours.

1. Set a sleep schedule.
2. Eliminate napping.
3. Power down electronics.
4. Set a bedtime alarm.
5. Exercise in the morning as opposed to late at night.
6. Eat dinner a few hours before bed.
7. Avoid caffeine, drugs, and alcohol
8. Create a relaxing bedtime routine
9. Make your bedroom a sanctuary.
10. Write down your worries.
11. Try lavender or chamomile aromatherapy.



# Exercise

You know how when you're anxious it can feel like your brain just won't stop firing? Like there's an explosion in your head?

Ah, yes. Those are your neurons. Neurons are great, especially excited neurons, because they help us think quickly, act quickly, and remember. But sometimes they get a bit carried away.

Enter gamma-aminobutyric, GABA, your brain's calm down chemical.

GABA's main job is to settle the brain cells that get a bit over-excited. If your GABA levels are low, anxiety happens.

So, you want healthy GABA levels.

Enter exercise.

Exercise is as important to mental health as it is to physical health. This is the case for everyone, but especially for those of us who regularly suffer from anxiety. People with anxiety have lower levels of the neurochemical GABA, and exercise has been proven to restore them to healthy levels. This strengthens the communication between our brain cells, in turn making us feel and function better.

So, we should exercise every day—20 minutes a day is plenty—even if exercise isn't exactly our favorite thing, or if we're busy and exhausted.

Here are some examples of exercise you can try. The key is to find something you enjoy doing and get your heart pumping.

- Playing sports
- Hiking
- Dancing
- Strength training
- Martial Arts
- Running
- Riding a bike
- Walking
- Yoga



# Breathing

Has anyone ever told you to “just breathe” when you’re feeling anxious, worried, or stressed? How did that make you feel? I’m guessing it made you feel pretty lousy, because it minimized what you were going through.

As if breathing was really going to help you meet that deadline or have that difficult conversation!

Well, here’s the thing. I’m not going to tell you to “just breathe,” because, realistically, you’ll need to do more than breathe to deal with your thoughts, feelings, and emotions. And your thoughts, feelings, and emotions are valid. You don’t need to breathe them away.

But you do need to breathe. Because, rudimentary as it might seem, breathing does help ease symptoms of anxiety.

Here’s how:

When we’re anxious, we typically constrict our bodies and take short, shallow breaths. This cuts off a steady supply of oxygen to our brains, which exacerbates feelings of anxiety and can lead to panic attacks. In order to calm ourselves down, we need to trigger the body’s natural relaxation response. Breathing—slowly, deeply, for an extended time period—is the first step in doing that.

Below you’ll find a seven-step process you can use to develop the practice of deep breathing on a daily basis, which will help keep your body in its natural, relaxed state.

1. **Time of Day:** Determine a time of day to practice deep breathing. Morning is ideal—it sets the tone for your entire day—but any time works. The key is consistency!
2. **Setting:** Select a setting for your breathing practice. You want this to be a quiet space where you won’t be distracted or interrupted. Be sure to turn off your electric devices.
3. **Timer:** Set a timer for 5 or 10 minutes. You can go longer if you’d like, but 5 minutes is a great starting point.
4. **Position:** Sit on the floor with a pillow and your legs crossed, or in a chair with your spine straight and feet planted on the floor. Let your hands rest gently in your lap.
5. **Inhale:** Inhale slowly through your nose until your lungs are filled to capacity, allowing your stomach to push out.
6. **Pause:** At the end of the inhalation, pause for three seconds.
7. **Exhale:** Exhale slowly, smoothly, and completely, until you’re empty, allowing your stomach to return to its natural position. Pause again. Then repeat!

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And for those inevitable moments of breathless, pent-up panic, here are some tried-and-true breathing techniques you can implement to help calm you down immediately.

**Shoulder Shrugs:** Roll your shoulders back and down so they are away from your ears. Breathe slowly and deeply in through your nose as you raise your shoulders by your ears. Breathe out and lower your shoulders. Repeat movement 3-5 times until you feel your tension melt away.

**Darth Vader Breath:** Breathe deeply in and out while exhaling strongly through an open mouth—just like Darth Vader would do! Visualization makes this technique extra fun.

**Ocean Breathing:** Close your eyes and imagine you are an ocean wave. Breathe in and out deeply as if you are an ocean wave crashing on the shore. Alternate the frequency of your breath to become shorter and longer waves.

**In/Out Breath:** Breathe deeply in and out, focusing on keeping your breath at a slow, controlled pace. Breathe in a positive word. Breathe out a negative word.

**Finger Breathing:** Practice deep, slow, and controlled breathing while using your thumb to press each finger, one at a time, in accordance with your breath.

**Hot Chocolate Breath:** Breathe deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth, imagining you are smelling hot chocolate, tea, or soup on the in breath and using your out breath to cool them off.



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# Support Group

It's normal—and healthy—to want to spend time alone, and to do so often. But when we're feeling stressed, worried, or anxious, sometimes it's best to do the opposite.

While it may seem helpful to isolate ourselves in these situations—to figure out our problems on our own, to bottle everything up to avoid burdening others—that's not always the case. In fact it rarely is. While we may be alone in the specifics of our experiences, we're together in the human experience. And we need each other.

One of the best things you can do for yourself is to develop a "support group" of people you feel safe sharing your thoughts, feelings, and emotions with. Someone—or multiple Someones—with whom you can share your inner life without fear of judgment, shame, or any of those other not so good things. This can be a parent, a sibling, a friend, a coach, a teacher, a neighbor, a therapist—it doesn't matter so much who the person is as it does the quality of your relationship with that person. With those people.

Who do you feel most "you" with? Who do you trust? Who makes you feel heard? Understood? Loved? Who can you cry with? How about laugh? Who gives the best advice? Who gives the best hugs? Who makes the best pancakes?

Spend time giving thought to this, and formulate a People I Feel Safe With list. That way, you can make an effort to continue cultivating those relationships. And next time you feel yourself keeping something in, ask yourself if you might feel lighter letting it out in someone else's presence.



# Express Yourself

And for those times you don't want to let it out in someone else's presence? Letting it out is still a good thing! Much better than emotional suppression or containment, which can be detrimental to our mental and physical wellbeing.

Lucky for us, there are many ways we can productively release our thoughts, feelings, and emotion. All we have to do is be creative, and listen to our intuition. What will serve us best in this moment?

Here are some ideas to get you started:

**Create a feelings journal.** A feelings journal can be whatever you want it to be. You can write in it, or draw, or paint, or tape pictures you've cut out from magazines. You can doodle, scribble, even rip out the pages. The most important thing is for you to be honest. Your feelings journal is for your eyes and your eyes only, so don't worry about what it looks like. Give yourself permission to be messy and complex within this space. Give yourself permission to be you.

**Paint.** Try watercolors, canvas painting, oil painting...use brushes, sponges, or your hands. Go for calm, relaxing colors like greens and blues, channel your inner rage with reds, oranges, and yellows, externalize that gloom with blacks and greys.

**Draw.** Whatever you see in your mind's eye: people, animals, landscapes, cartoons. Try drawing spirals, or triangles, or any other repetitive pattern—formally known as Zentangle. Drawing is a reputable form of meditation.

**Write.** Poems, essays, journal entries, letters, short stories, plays, novels, memoirs—all are wonderful means of self-expression. Don't feel like writing something lengthy? Start with one sentence. I feel \_\_\_\_\_. I remember \_\_\_\_\_. I am \_\_\_\_\_.

**Color.** Within the lines. Outside the lines. Half-in, half-out. Coloring has been proven to relieve stress and help people ground themselves.

**Make a collage.** Cut out pictures and words from magazines, newspapers, books, articles—any thing you see that speaks to you. Then grab a piece of paper or poster board and glue them on to make something new. Something you.

**Play music.** If it makes noise, it'll work. Create soft, smooth melodies, or jam out if you need to.

**Yell.** Into a pillow. Out the window. In an open field. Seriously. It may sound funny, but it helps. Just be sure if you're with people you give them a heads up. You know, something like, "Hey, I'm about to yell." That way you won't scare them off. Who knows—maybe they'll even join in the fun.



# Make time for yourself.

You're busy. I know. School, work, activities, clubs—the to do list grows before you even have a chance to catch up. But you should try to make time, every day, or at least a few days a week, to do something you love. Something that brings you joy. Something that reminds you of who you are on the inside.

It might not seem like it's going to help you feel less anxious, especially if you're anxious because it feels like there just isn't enough time in a day.

*Now you're telling me I have to add something else to my to do list?*

Well, no. You don't have to do anything.

But think about it.

What if you took ten minutes, fifteen, maybe even twenty, to write, dance around your kitchen, play with your dog, try a new recipe, drive around town aimlessly, listen to music, or whatever it is that makes you most glad to be alive? Would that be a waste of time? Or would it be time well spent? Would it make you smile? Laugh? Breathe? Would you return to your next to do list item feeling a little more grateful and a little less tense?

Try it for a day. See if it's a welcome reprieve from your routine. If it is, consider doing it—or something different!—every day for a week. A month. A year. Maybe even your entire life.



*How much space can you make for love?*

*For joy?*

*For light?*





# Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a fancy word for paying attention. It means being fully engaged with the present moment and reconnecting with your immediate experience—the sensations in your brain and body, as well as the sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and feel of the world around you. It can be as simple as noticing the sunlight peeking through the trees, feeling the breeze against your skin, or tasting the sugary sweet of a spoonful of ice cream. Mindfulness also requires you notice your thoughts, feelings, and emotions, but not react to them. Imagine being a detached observer watching a movie of your brain. I see that thought, but that thought isn't me. That sort of thing.

Sounds simple, right?

That's because it is.

(Sort of).

It can be difficult to pay attention when you're experiencing anxiety. It's much easier—and more natural—to get caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts than it is to let the thoughts pass over you and say hello to the nearby pine tree instead. But mindfulness has been found to change the structure and function of the brain—particularly an anxious one—and therefore plays a key role in helping us prevent and manage our anxiety.

Here's how it operates.

Mindfulness causes:

- an increase in the density of the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for calming down our instinctive emotional responses, like fear.
- a decrease in the size of the amygdala.
- a stronger connectivity between the reactive amygdala and the rational, calming prefrontal cortex.
- an increase in GABA levels, the brain's calm down chemical.
- a decrease in cortisol levels, the stress hormone involved in anxiety.
- an activation of the relaxation response, which reverses fight or flight.



Below you'll find a variety of mindfulness exercises you can implement in your daily routine.

## 1. Mindful Breathing:

Start by breathing, slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Let your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Your breath cycle should last 6 seconds. Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your awareness on its pathway as it enters and leaves your body.

## 2. Mindful Observation:

Choose a natural object in your immediate environment and focus all your attention on it for a minute or two. This could be a flower, an insect, a dog, the moon. Don't "do" anything. Simply notice what you are looking at. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Explore every aspect of its formation, allowing yourself to be consumed by its presence. Connect with and celebrate its energy and purpose in the world.

## 3. Mindful Awareness:

Think of something you do every day that you might take for granted, like opening a door, driving to school, or eating breakfast. Pick one thing to focus on today—your "touch point"—and instead of going through the motion on autopilot, stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings these actions bring to your life. If, for example, your touch point is eating a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast, you may focus the texture of the eggs in your mouth, the energy the toast provides your body, the joy of sharing this meal with someone you love. The more aware you can be throughout the day while completing simple tasks, the more relaxed and in the moment you will feel.

## 4. Mindful Listening:

Much of what we feel is influenced by past experience and preconceptions. Say, for example, you hear a song that reminds you of a bad breakup. You would probably feel sad listening to it, right? This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way. Close your eyes and put on your headphones. Pick a song you have never heard before. Ignore labels—genre, title, artist name—and instead allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the song's duration. Listen to the dynamics of each instrument. Separate each sound in your mind and analyze each, one by one. Hone in on the vocals: voice, range, and tones. The idea is to listen intently, to fully experience the song without preconception of judgment. Don't think. Hear. You'll find that, the more you practice, the easier it will be to listen—in all aspects of your life—without being swayed by past experiences and preconceptions.

## 5. Mindful Immersion:

The purpose of this exercise is to take a regular routine and experience it fully, rather than anxiously moving through one task in order to get on to the next. If you are cleaning your house, for example, feel and become the motion of sweeping the floor. Notice the way your muscles contract while you do the dishes. Instead of moving through each task as quickly as possible, slow down. Pay attention. Immerse yourself—physically, mentally, and spiritually—in the experience.

## 6. Mindful Appreciation:

Notice five things in your day that usually go unappreciated. These can be objects, people, nature—it's totally up to you! Use a notepad to write down your five things throughout the day. Then, find out everything you can about them. Who are they? What are they? Why do they exist? How do they affect your life? How might they affect other lives? The purpose of this exercise is to encourage you to appreciate the ways in which "ordinary" things make your life better.

## Mindfulness and the Body

Do you ever feel like your thoughts are moving so rapidly and uncontrollably that it's hard to believe you have a body? That you aren't entirely brain? For those of us who struggle with anxiety, it's normal to feel this way. Our brains are powerful creatures, and sometimes they can feel all-consuming. But the truth is, we are just as much body as we are brain. And our brains and bodies are connected. So it's important for us to bring ourselves back to our bodies in periods of stress, worry, and panic. And to be sure we're grounded in our bodies even when we aren't feeling particularly anxious. Here are a few ways we can do this (in addition to breathing, our go-to tool):

### Yoga

Yoga is a mind-body exercise consisting of a series of poses that focus the attention inward. Think of it as moving meditation. It forces us to be present and control our breathing, thereby centering our thoughts and evoking a sense of calm and wholeness. It has been proven as an effective means of dealing with anxiety, and it's a great form of exercise.

Try these few beginner poses at home, and if you'd like to explore the practice more, sign up for a class at a local studio.



## Cross-Crawl Technique

Cross-crawl refers to movements in which we use opposition, meaning opposite sides of the body work together to coordinate the right arm and left leg, then the left arm and right leg. Crawling, walking, running, and swimming all fall under this category. Performing these movements builds the bridge between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, allowing for electrical impulses and information to pass freely between the two. This is essential for physical coordination and cerebral activities, such as learning language, reading, and hand-to-eye coordination. The cross-crawl technique is one of the easiest ways activate your brain development and nervous system, and is an effective tool in building self-confidence and combating anxiety.

### How-To:

1. Stand tall with your arms at your sides.
  2. On an inhale, raise your right arm up. At the same time you raise your right arm, lift your left leg, bending at the knee.
  3. On an exhale, lower both the right arm and left leg.
  4. On an inhale, raise your left arm up. At the same time, lift your right leg, bending at the knee.
  5. On an exhale, lower both the left arm and right leg.
- Now, try adding a mantra. Each time you raise your arm and leg, repeat a mantra that makes you feel strong, brave, and empowered. Examples of mantras include:

*I've got this.  
I am worthy.  
I am enough.*



## Superhero Stance

Anxiety can leave us feeling weak and powerless, especially when we experience it on a regular basis. And in our most despairing moments, we need something that will remind us we are the exact opposite. Enter the superhero stance, a mind-body tool we can use to counteract anxiety and call forth our inner strength and power.

### How-To:

1. Stand tall with your feet firmly planted and your arms at your sides.
2. Look straight ahead. Be sure your head is lifted.
3. Stick your chest out (like Superman) and put your arms behind your torso.
4. Remain in this position for 10 seconds or longer.

# 5-Point Scale

The 5-Point Scale is exactly what it sounds like. We assign numbers to our feelings and their external manifestations to help us identify where we're at and what we can do in each stage to calm ourselves down.

## How You Feel

## How to Help

1

**Just right**  
Calm  
Peaceful  
Happy  
Relaxed  
Focused

**STAY.**  
Keep up the good work!

2

**Manageable**  
Extra energy in brain and body  
A bit "off"  
Can stay focused  
Can keep working

Practice in/out breathing  
Use a positive statement  
*You're safe. You're doing great.*

3

**Reving up**  
Nervous  
Worried  
Annoyed  
Jittery  
Can't sit still  
Can't focus

Stretch  
Practice cross-crawl technique or superhero stance (see page 17).  
Talk it out.

4

**Starting to lose it**  
Angry  
Scared  
Can't think clearly  
Don't want to engage, listen, or follow directions

Find a calm, quiet place.  
Use STOPP technique (see page 20).  
Practice ocean breathing (see page 9).

5

**Out of control**  
Furious  
Terrified  
Upset  
Heart racing  
Yelling  
Crying  
Fighting  
Running away

Ride the Wave (see page 21).

Ask for help.

*Remember, you will get through this. This is just a moment.*

# STOPP

STOPP is an acronym for a powerful skill to use when a crisis arises and you notice your emotions getting out of control.

**Stop.** Whatever you're doing, just pause for a moment.

**Take a breath.** Notice your breathing.

**Observe.** Notice what is happening. Where has my mind gone? What do I feel?

**Pull Back.** Zoom out. See the bigger picture. What is another way of looking at this situation? How important is it? What advice would I give a friend? This will pass.

**Practice.** Practice the skills that work best for you. Proceed mindfully.

By practicing STOPP, your mind will be on autopilot less, and you will be able to check in with how you are feeling, what you are thinking, and what behavior you're engaging in.



# Riding the Wave

A surfer doesn't fight the powerful ocean wave. He moves with the wave, riding its natural tide. "Riding the Wave" is the practice of surfing your own powerful and negative emotions. Rather than fighting sadness, anger, and other negative emotions, you allow your emotions to wash over you like a wave, riding them out until they pass so that you can make wise decisions from a place of calm.

How-To:

Experience your emotion as a wave coming and going.

Don't try to get RID of the emotion. Don't push it away.

Try not to BLOCK the emotion.

Try not to SUPPRESS the emotion.

Let it flow.

Don't HOLD ON to the emotion, either.

Don't AMPLIFY it.

Let the emotion wash over you like a wave. It will pass.



# Improve The Moment

All of us have distress and frustration in our lives. You forget your homework. You lose your car keys. A friend rejects your invitation. You get a flat tire on the way to an important meeting. Things happen. Sometimes you can do something about it. Other times you can't. The IMPROVE skill is for those times when you can't do anything about the crisis at hand or can't solve the problem right away.

IMPROVE is an acronym which stands for:

**Imagery:** Imagine a better situation than the one you're in. Imagine everything going well. Imagine yourself coping effectively. Make up secret room within yourself, or envision a place that is calming and beautiful your mind go there. Imagine painful emotions draining out of you like water out of a pipe.

**Meaning:** Find or create some purpose, meaning, or value in the pain. Focus on whatever positive aspects of a painful situation you can find. Repeat them over and over in your mind.

**Prayer:** Prayer can be helpful, whatever that means to you. Ask for strength to bear this difficult situation.

**Relaxation:** Do you tighten your muscles in a crisis? Most people do, but physical pain and exhaustion can worsen a crisis. Try tensing and relaxing each large muscle group. Breathe in and out slowly and deliberately. Consider taking a warm bath.

**One thing at a time:** Focus on this moment, this issue. Try not to think about past issues or worry about the future.

**Vacation:** Have you ever said, "I need a break"? Take one! You deserve it. It doesn't have to be to Hawaii. You can take a brief vacation at home by doing something you enjoy like cooking or taking a walk around the block. Take a one-hour breather from any work that must be done.

**Encouragement:** Be your own cheerleader, your biggest fan. Tell yourself you can do it. Come up with examples of times you've handled a difficult situations effectively. Validate yourself and your abilities. You are stronger and braver than you think.



# Emergency Action: Panic Attack Procedures

A panic attack is often a reaction to fear, conscious or unconscious. The physical reactions we experience during a panic attack are the result of our bodies reacting to this fear. Understanding how our mind and body work during these episodes can help us develop a healthier response to frightening situations.

**Common reactions to panic include:**

Your body goes on alert. Your eyes may dilate to improve vision. Your heart rate quickens to circulate blood faster to your vital organs. Your muscles tense in case you need to move quickly.

Your mind remains stuck on fearful thoughts.

Your breathing becomes more rapid.

**If you feel a panic attack coming on:**

Take a slow, deep breath through your nose while counting to five. Put your hand on your stomach to feel each breath.

When you reach the count of five, let the breath out slowly through your nose at the same rate.

Relax your muscles. Sit or lie down if needed.

Close your eyes and begin to focus solely on your toes. Curl them under tightly for a count of five, squeezing the muscles together as hard as you can, then relax.

Continue up your body, isolating each muscle group (calves, thighs, buttocks, stomach, chest, shoulders, neck, fingers, hands, and arms) until you reach your face. By that time you should feel much more calmer.

**If you are with someone who is currently having a panic attack:**

Be calm.

Be patient.

Sit with the person.

Remind the person that he/she is not crazy.

If he/she is having trouble breathing, encourage slow breathing through the nose or have him/her put hands on the stomach to feel each breath.

Ask what needs to change in the environment for the person to feel safe.

Change it if you can.

If the person can talk, engage in a conversation

Usually, just knowing that someone is willing to be there is enough to help the person calm down.

# Self-Talk: Our Inner Voices

Are you aware of your inner-voice—the one that is sometimes cheerful and supportive, and other times negative and self-defeating? This internal chatter is referred to as self-talk. Everyone engages in self-talk. It can be helpful or harmful depending on which voice you choose. We are storytelling creatures, which means much of our lives are determined by the stories we do—and don't—tell ourselves.

Here are some suggestions for minimizing negative self-talk.

## AVOID

Fortune-telling: Constantly predicting things will turn out badly no matter what you say or do.

Overgeneralization: Predicting the future based on a single event that has happened in the past.

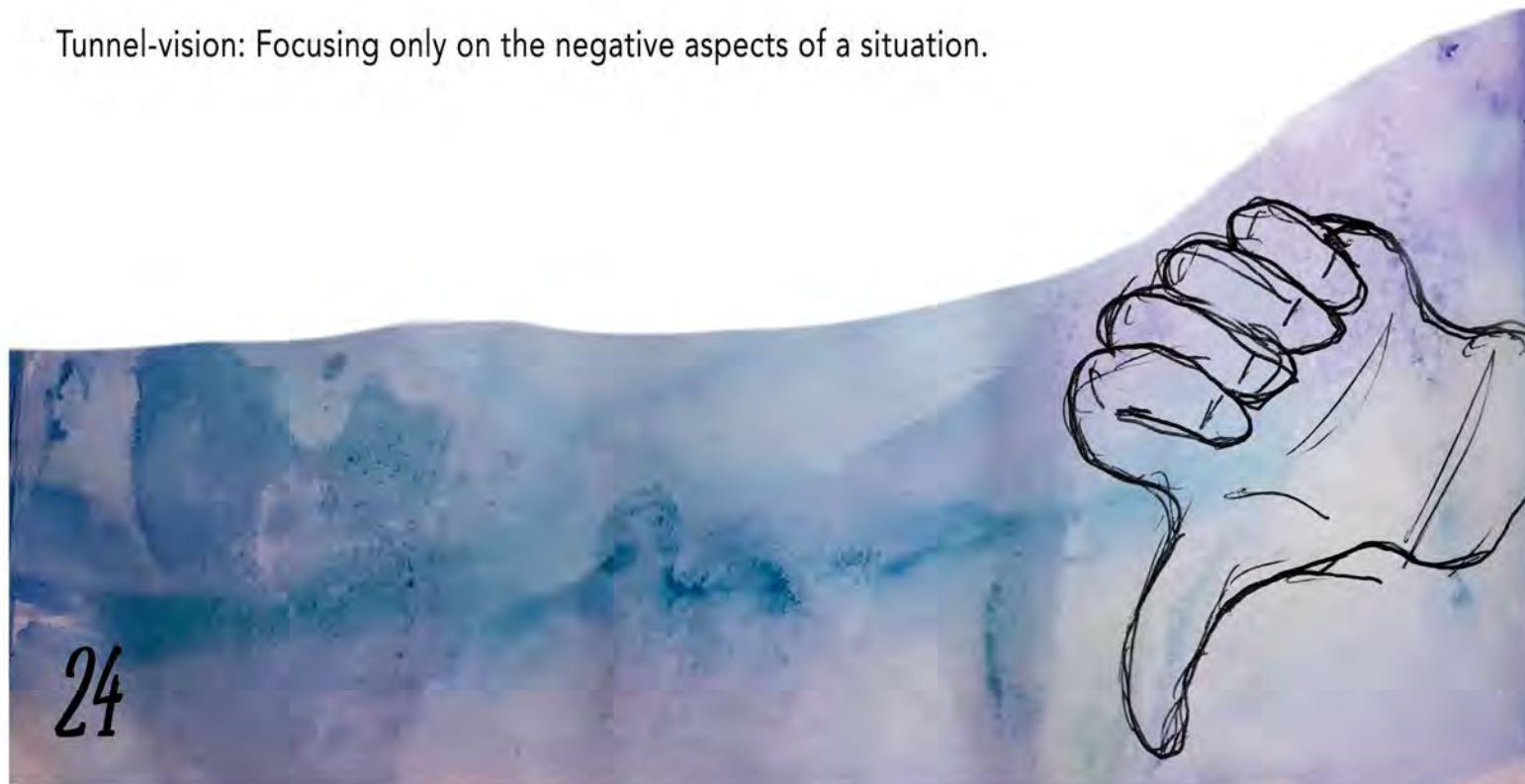
All-or-nothing thinking: Failing to acknowledge there is almost always a middle ground.

Catastrophizing: Seeing only a negative future.

Emotional reasoning: Becoming so lost in your emotions that you can't think clearly.

Personalizing: Blaming yourself for how others behave.

Tunnel-vision: Focusing only on the negative aspects of a situation.



## DO

Recognize that just because you think something is true doesn't mean it is true.  
e.g. It's not always easy to avoid using negative self-talk, but here's what you can do to try:

Talk to your worry: Expect it. Take care of it. Boss it around!

Be a wet noodle. Flexibility is key!

Step into the unknown. Be unsure and uncomfortable on purpose. Have courage to do the opposite of what the anxiety is telling you to do.

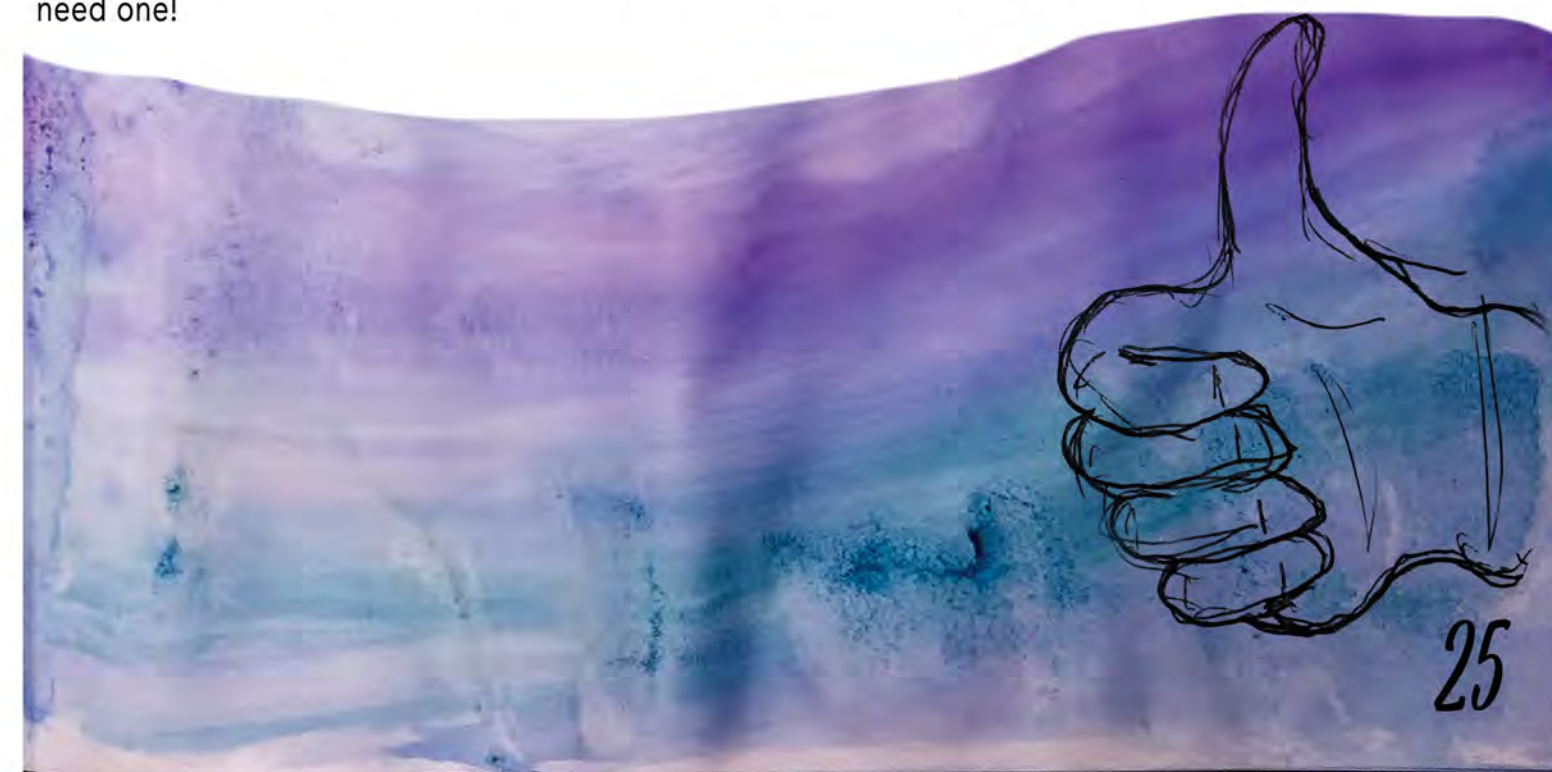
Set a goal. Ask yourself what you want and define your goal. Then make a list of steps you need to complete in order to reach it.

Make an emotional safety plan. Find out what skills and strategies work for you and practice them regularly.

Problem solve. Break it down. Try to understand the situation. Be sure you're thinking clearly before you act.

Reframe the narrative. Tell the second half of the story, using your brain to create new options and pathways. Turn worried thoughts into calm thoughts. Make a list of reasons why you want to make a change.

Mostly importantly, show kindness to yourself. Validate your feelings. Honor your bravery in tackling your anxieties. Make a list and celebrate your past successes, small and large. Give yourself a break. We all need one!



# Moving Forward

Phew! That was a lot. That's because anxiety is complex, and manifests differently in everyone. Therefore, there isn't a one size fits all approach to prevention and management. Some tools and techniques you've encountered in these pages might work better for you than others. Some you might use every day. Some you might not use at all.

That's ok!

My hope is that, in reading this book, you will have had time to reflect on your unique experiences with anxiety and to ask yourself which of these tools and techniques might serve you best. That way, you can begin trying them out.

My hope, too, is that you will keep this book in a safe place and return to it any time you find yourself feeling helpless in the face of worry, stress, and anxiety.

Because you aren't helpless.

You are strong, brave, and powerful, and more than capable of handling whatever life throws at you.

Sometimes you just need someone to remind you. Sometimes that Someone is another person, like me. Sometimes that Someone is you.

Thank you for being here with me. Thank you for making space for me to be here with you.

Diane Lasher-Penti, LMFT  
Youth Services Director

# Additional Resources

## Hotlines:

211 – Infoline and Suicide Hotline

911 – Emergency

Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services: 1-888-999-5545

Domestic Violence Crisis Services: 1-888-774-2900

## Community Agencies that provide a wide variety of services and ages:

Institute of Living, Hartford CT: 860-545-7200 [instituteofliving.org](http://instituteofliving.org)

Institute of Living, Anxiety Disorders Center: 860-545-7685 [instituteofliving.org](http://instituteofliving.org)

Community Health Resources: 1-877-844-3571 [chrhealth.org](http://chrhealth.org)

Stafford Family Services: 860-684-4239 [staffordct.org](http://staffordct.org)

Ellington Youth Services: 860-870-3130 [youth.ellington-ct.gov](http://youth.ellington-ct.gov)

Child and Adolescents Behavioral Health Services, ECHN: 860-647-6827 [echn.org](http://echn.org)

The Village for Families and Children, Hartford, CT: 860-236-4511 [thevillage.org](http://thevillage.org)

New England Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Glastonbury, CT 860-430-5515 [necbt.com](http://necbt.com)

Community Child Guidance Clinic, Manchester, CT: 860-643-2101 [ccgcinc.org](http://ccgcinc.org)

Mary's Place A Center for Grieving Children, Windsor, CT: 860-688-9621 [marysplacect.org](http://marysplacect.org)

Anxiety Treatment Center, Farmington CT: 860-269-7813 [ctanxiety.com](http://ctanxiety.com)

The Bridge Family Center, Rockville, CT 860-870-2543 [bridgefamilycenter.org](http://bridgefamilycenter.org)

West Meadow Counseling Center, Ellington, CT 860-454-0520, [westmeadowcounseling.com](http://westmeadowcounseling.com)

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Be Kind to  
Your Mind

