



HOW TO BREAK-FREE FROM
**UNHEALTHY
ANXIETY**

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How to Break-Free from Unhealthy Anxiety

You can think of anxiety as having two parts a cognitive or thinking portion and a somatic or physical portion. If your anxiety is affecting your thoughts you may worry a lot or you may obsess about things and it's natural to have some amount of anxiety regarding tests all your bills but the worry that could be considered as a disorder is when you're worrying about everything absolutely everything so let's take a closer look here...

Understanding the Anxiety Cycle:

The incredibly remarkable thing about your brain, is that it's made to rewire itself throughout your entire life! This is called neuro plasticity scientist used to think that after childhood that our brain was mostly done with this, now that we have better imaging technology, we can literally see how the brain changes depending on how we use it.

Available below is one simple thing you can do to rewire your brain to be less anxious. Which is simple only not necessarily easy.

I'm excited to share three incredible steps that you can take to make it happen and then I'll also share 9 skills that you can do on your own or with a therapist. Helping you to build up your ability to take control of your anxiety. If you like to learn more about how to treat anxiety I also hold personal 1-1 sessions and facilitate group programs that support woman through their self-empowerment process.

What's great to know is that our brain has this incredible ability to rewire itself to learn and heal so I want to share some ways on how to do that with anxiety.

If we want to change how our brain processes anxiety, it makes it easier to first understand three principles of anxiety.

- 1. What is Anxiety?** Understanding what anxiety is may seem obvious because you already know how it feels to have anxiety, we all do. However, what you need to do is understand that your perspective on anxiety, what's important to let go of is the idea that anxiety is bad. Because it is not inherently bad, anxiety is uncomfortable sometimes it gets in the way but we all experience anxiety because it supposed to serve a really important function to motivate us to avoid real danger. We are supposed to feel anxious when encountering dangerous creatures as it helps us to be safe, we are supposed to be anxious when we know we have an important test coming up because that should motivate us to practise, study, rehearse. Anxiety prompts us to know that something is important to us. Anxiety and excitement are basically the same chemical reaction in your body with adrenaline triggering that sympathetic activation and prepping you for action. When we look at anxiety as being something uncomfortable but acceptable and a normal part of life, suddenly we develop new tools to work with it and that includes working with the other type of anxiety, so the second thing we need to understand is disordered anxiety.

2. **Disordered anxiety**- Is when your anxiety seems to take over your life, this is anxiety that makes it hard to function properly such as attend meetings, zoom calls, even visiting friends or to simply enjoy life at all. There's a popular belief that anxiety is disordered when its more severe, though anxiety is actually disordered when one of two things happen. The first being when you feel in danger but you are actually safe. For example, I had a client who was scared to go to shopping centres she would feel like she couldn't breathe and get very sweaty at the idea of entering one. Now those shopping centres may have germs however shopping centres are not a threat to your safety however she was having a real physiological response to something that was actually safe. So, anxiety can be disordered when you have a danger response in your body but you're actually safe. The second way (as I've touched on above) that your anxiety can be disordered is when your it interferes with your ability to function, this is essentially what determines if a person has an anxiety disorder, your anxiety or your attempts to avoid anxiety stop you from affectively facing life. When this happens, you start avoiding school or calling in sick to work you stop leaving the house or spending time with friends pretty soon your anxiety is having a negative effect on your whole life and stopping you from doing things you love.

So what causes anxiety to get out of our control?

The Anxiety Cycle. Every day throughout our day we have experiences and we interpret these experiences as either being safe or dangerous. So, let's Play out a scenario – you are going for a walk, there's a beautiful warm breeze and you can smell lavender in the air when you see a dog up ahead, everyone interprets an experience differently for some people this will be a fun encounter but for some reason you think 'that dog is going to bite me' this leads to feelings of fear and anxiety. This feels uncomfortable and you may even take them as a sign that your thoughts are true. So, you escape. You decide to run away and within a minute you are out of there and nothing bad happens.

THE CYCLE STARTS HERE... because now your brain releases this surge of relief. 'EKKK that was too close, the only way I stayed safe was because I ran away, I really could have died!' And your brain thinks 'I better do that again I'm going to motivate my body to avoid that situation by increasing their anxiety about it' and ta-daaaah your anxiety goes up. Every single time that we avoid a threat and survive. Our brain thinks 'let's do that again' so it lays down neural pathways this wiring that reinforces that behaviour.

The very purpose of these emotions is to motivate us into action, but that's a whole other subject which I cover more thoroughly in sessions.

Our brain, because we've convinced it that the dog was a threat takes action into its own hands and it increases your anxiety levels around dogs. Every time we feel anxiety and then avoid the situation our anxiety level will go up a little.

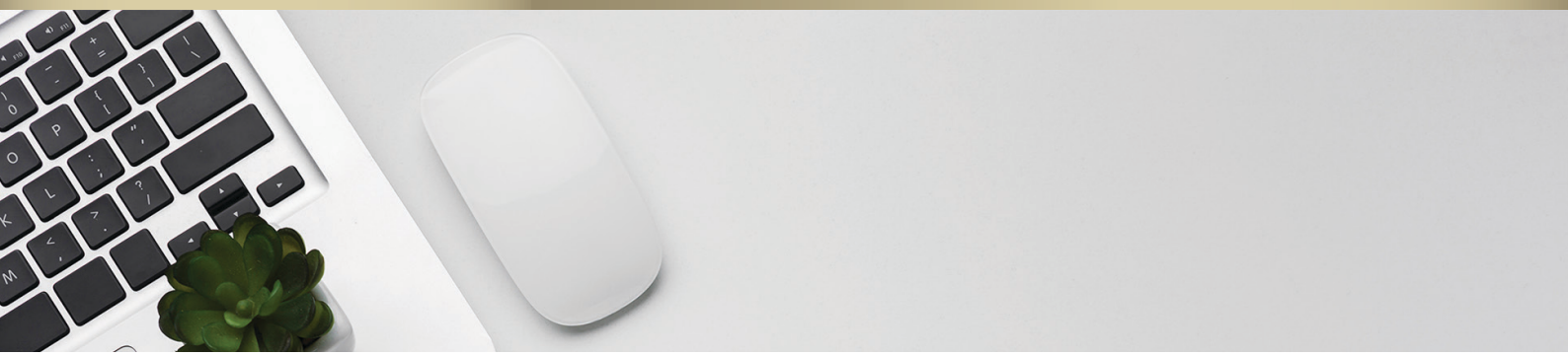
3. **Avoidance Grows Anxiety**- Actually creates overwhelming anxiety. A heavy cycle I know I have created for myself many times over. Now clearly there are many ways to avoid- such as literally running away or physically avoiding but there's also emotional avoidance so if you have social anxiety you might still go to the party but only if you drink ahead of time or you might be in a relationship but you're scared of getting hurt, in turn you decide to not allow yourself to fully open up your heart towards this other person. You stay emotionally distant or you protect yourself by not committing. Not wanting to be vulnerable you might even develop 'trust' issues, which is actually a form of distraction from your underlining feelings.

Avoidance increases your anxiety, and the way it plays out is that it actually shrinks down your world. For example, you might start avoiding situations where a dog might be present by not going to visit your friends' homes or avoiding going to the park and without fully realising it your world has now shrunken, you miss out on building good relationships or you stop going to gatherings and your world gets more and more constrained.

Now looking at this cycle we have two places where we can intervene, where we can stop that cycle from spiralling out of our control. The first place is with our actions when we feel it but we're actually safe if we stick with it and stay there, if we feel our emotions and sensations without running away and again if you do this and you don't die then your brain learns 'phew what a relief, I guess that not all dogs are dangerous let's do that again and it sends out a surge of relief this leads to a gradual decrease in anxiety over time and a gradual increase in your emotional muscles your ability to feel emotions and sensations that are uncomfortable without needing to escape them all the time, so you get better at feeling anxious.

As you do this your brain literally lays down new neural pathways that now signal to you that 'not all dogs are dangerous, I don't need to be anxious around dogs' it literally changes your brain chemistry releasing less cortisol and adrenaline and other stress hormones.

This is the most straightforward way to rewire your brain to have less anxiety, but it can be tricky... if it were super easy you would've already done it so let's break it down into three glorious yet big steps-



Action

(Thoughts are another powerful way however in here we'll look at Action Steps)

- **Make an Exposure Hierarchy-** Breaking them down into tiny steps and you start by courageously facing the easiest one first. Now this is the part that most people miss they jump in too fast then they panic or they escape and they never do it again and then that fear is reinforced. So, make an exposure hierarchy and write down as many teeny little steps as you can think of.
- **Change your Rules-** Most of us are aware by now that courage doesn't mean the absence of fear, but choosing that something is more important than avoiding fear. In acceptance and commitment therapy this is called willingness allowing yourself to do something even though it makes you uncomfortable. If you make a rule for yourself like 'I'm going to do this until I get too anxious' then your brain will be like 'awesome let's do that, then I can escape' so it will make you really anxious and when we say 'I'm going to do this thing unless it makes me to anxious' than we are just inviting anxiety to make all our decisions for us. So, when it comes to exposure you choose an easy activity to start with and then you stay with it and you watch yourself for a certain amount of time or until your anxiety decreases by half during the exposure. Now while you're facing your anxiety and practising willingness grounding activities and self-regulation activities the body up approach to decreasing anxiety can be helpful but the most important part is that you sit with your anxiety for a little while until it decreases. Or at least for a certain set amount of time.
- **It's Tackle Time-** It's time to allow yourself to tackle your fears-face-forward! You've got this! go get anxious and see if you survive, because you will. Using the dog example you could simply start (because that's key remember- starting with simple steps) so start by repeatedly imagining yourself with the dog and you practicing this daily for 10 minutes until that activity no longer makes you very anxious. And then you might Talk with a friend who has a dog to set up the next steps so you might see a dog through a window and then just stay there and you sit with it and your breath and you allow yourself to relax and you do this every day for 10 minutes until your anxiety decreases.

And then you practice being in the same room as a dog on a leash and then perhaps touching a tiny dog on a leash and then petting a tiny dog on a leash and then eventually are moving up to a bigger dog and then off leash and then eventually you get yourself to a point where you can visit a dog park sit down and stay there for 30 minutes. It's okay if you feel anxious it's okay if you feel uncomfortable or you sweat or you shake or experience many kinds of reactions but you just stick with it and pretty soon your brain learns 'it's cool most dogs are safe, I'm okay' and your anxiety will decrease. Now again you can do some physiological grounding activities whilst in the mixed of your anxiety but don't use those as another way just to avoid anxiety use those as a way to practice willingness this willingness to feel what you're feeling and accept it as being normal, natural and okay.

So, there's the simple solution to anxiety **face your fears** and they will decrease. This may seem too simple or too impossible or even too big of a leap. Therapist have devised a many ways to break that down into a bunch of tiny steps and skills that you can learn to make it easier.

If you want to go more into depth that let's do that, let's talk about the more detailed process of how we do this, the specific skills that help us move from anxiety avoidance to power over our anxiety.

Gradual Exposure Therapy-which is what I just described. Is a research backed approach, shown to help reduce anxiety and treat anxiety disorders. It does this because it literally changes the brain, rewiring the neural pathways and changing the release of chemicals in the brain.

HERE ARE A FEW SKILLS YOU CAN DEVELOP TO HELP YOU FACE YOUR FEARS AND BEAT THEM

The fascinating thing about our brain is that it's made to rewire itself all the time! (Yes, you read that correctly) how incredible. This is called neuro plasticity, scientist used to think that after childhood our brain was pretty much locked in place but now that we have better imaging technology we can literally see how the brain changes depending on how we use it so here we are going to look at ten extra skills you can develop on your own or with a therapist to build up your ability to take control of your anxiety.

HERE ARE THOSE 10 EXTRA SKILLS THAT YOU CAN DO ON YOUR OWN OR WITH A THERAPIST.

1. CHOOSE SOMETHING THAT MATTERS MORE

Remember why you want to do hard things. This is so very important and powerful when you actually practise focusing on this. Maybe it's so you can spend more time with people you care about or maybe it's because you would like to leave a legacy without allowing fear to control you. Write down why are you want to beat anxiety or even more importantly why you're willing to experience anxiety if allowing yourself to feel it opens up to all the good things in your life.

2. SAY YES TO WILLINGNESS

We can practice a non-judgemental and curious attitude, this is basically changing your rules were before you subconsciously said I can't handle feeling that way. You now say it's okay to feel anxious sometimes, I don't like it but it won't injure me because anxiety is uncomfortable but not dangerous it's certainly not fun but it's also not bad either. It's worth it for me to live the life I want to have for some anxiety come with it. So, this includes physical acceptance and learning to notice and allow your physical sensations to be there and to just breathe into them to make space for them. What's great is that there are some skills we can practice that help us increase our ability to sit with our anxiety, whilst we face our fears. And you can actively learn and practice these two skills through meditation and mindfulness. Mindfulness helps you sit with your experience, your thoughts, emotions and sensations without needing to escape or avoid them it's a training program for distressed tolerance. You can download mindful meditations like Calm or Breathe and do it for 10 minutes a day. The more you do it, the easier it will get. I've also co-authored in a book called The Anxiety Relief Handbook where there's many highly skilled and dedicated therapists providing readers with various tools and strategies to work through their anxiety. In addition to willingness which is this active acceptance of what your experiencing in the present moment you can also learn to calm your body through grounding and self-regulation activities. To help calm and soothe your body and that's going to send messages to your brain that you're safe and it will create this cycle were your anxiety starts to decrease through gradual exposure.

3. BUILD EMOTIONAL MUSCLES

When you make facing your fears a normal part of your life it suddenly gets easier and more natural. Our brain is like a big muscle the more you practice something the smoother and the thicker those neural pathways get. That wiring that says 'I can do hard things' get stronger and just like muscles when you start working out those weights might seem heavy at first but as you get stronger the easier and easier it gets to lift. Stay curious with it and keep heart about it all as it will get easier and life will start to feel lighter again.

4. RELEASE PERFECTIONISM

Letting go of the need to do everything perfectly to be okay instead replace this with a growth mindset which says 'I'm going to keep focus and action alive and learning and that involves messing up sometimes. Let go of comparison as your source of self-worth and instead make your goals about growth, this means you may need to let go of looking perfect all the time or never messing up. So, one active practice that can help with this is sharing around the dinner table every night a mistake that you've made (including the highlight of your day) or if that's not an option for you, writing it down or sharing it on social media and talking about how mistakes are a good way to learn and grow, maybe on a conference call and ask for others to share too.

5. CHANGE HOW YOU SEE SITUATIONS

Change it how you perceive certain situations can be quite hard without a therapist or a friend with knowledge on the subject so this is intervening at the thought level so with the dog example with a thought 'this dog can kill me' you notice that thought and then you replace it with something like 'most dogs are safe that dog looks nice my brother says the dogs are safe' changing how we think can sometimes work in the moment of anxiety but usually this works best as a big picture preventative approach and it's less functional at the moment of fear. If you really want to work on this by yourself do some research on cognitive distortions. And you might want to also read the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R Covey, where he gives an in-depth insight on Paradigms.

6. DO ONE SMALL STEP EVERY DAY

Write down your fears and break them into teeny tiny little steps, start with small fears and when you have success sitting with them you gradually move on to bigger and bigger ones. This is where having a detailed written down exposure hierarchy is super helpful. A challenge for yourself to do one thing every day that scares you. Write down your goals and your accomplishments along with all of the things you are grateful for. And your emotional muscles will get stronger each day.

7. **STAY WITH YOUR FEARS UNTIL YOU CALM DOWN**

Or for a period of time. Never set the rule 'I'll stay with this unless I get too anxious' this is asking your brain to make you anxious you need to set an amount of time you sit with your fear. To allow yourself to be uncomfortable but for a cause. Then when you're going to do the activity write down your anxiety as a number on a scale from 0 to 10. Stay with activity actively allowing yourself to be present and allow yourself to feel the emotions that will pass through you. The better you do at accepting and being present with these emotions the more likely the anxiety will decrease. In general, the recommendation is to stay with the activity until your anxiety goes down by half so if you started at 6 stay in the dog park until you're at a 3. However, if you're practising willingness allowing yourself to feel what you're feeling, you can also set an amount of time to stay 30 minutes and then give yourself credit for doing hard things. We can't force our anxiety to change right away and trying to do so often backfires but the one thing that always increases anxiety is saying if I get too anxious, I'll leave.

8. **GET SUPPORT**

Not to avoid! but to help you to face your fears this may look like taking a friend with you to the dog park or working with the therapist to face your fears in session. It could be asking someone to hold you accountable. Getting support can help you build up your ability to do the things on your own.

9. **BE COMPASSIONATE WITH YOURSELF**

Give yourself credit for all of the hard things you do. Write them down, tell someone about your wins. Even if they are small or easy for other people. Practice patience and being gentle with yourself, sometimes we think we can berate ourselves into changing. As if we punish ourselves or talk hatefully towards ourselves that it will motivate us in to changing only anxiety isn't about lack of caring, it's about being paralysed by caring too much. Punishment including self-punishment will never work as a lasting form of self-motivation. Instead give yourself a little love or better yet love in abundance!! and you will find yourself a surprising amount of strength and energy in that compassion. If this is really hard for you, it's something you can practice and develop as a skill. Pay attention to your self-talk, write out self-compassionate affirmations such as 'I accept myself as I am,' 'I allow myself to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes.' 'I am worthy of compassion.' 'Just like any other human being, I have strengths and weaknesses and that's okay.' 'I give myself the gift of unconditional love.'



AND LASTLY

I encourage you to start to invite more of your vulnerability in, by listening with your heart. So you can name what you're feeling, trusting that whatever it is, it's okay. Practise listening to your body by noticing the sensations you are experiencing and by paying attention to your self-talk. In treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding that we give to those that we care for, we are practising self-compassion, and this alone can help ease anxiety.

It's important to note that all of your anxiety won't completely go away which is a really good thing. We have a normal level of healthy anxiety so that means anxiety that is helpful and a beneficial part of our life. This anxiety is functional, helping us to stay safe and motivated to do things like practising before a speech and be safe whilst using knives. However this process will help you get rid of the unhealthy anxiety or the anxiety we create through our own actions and distorted thinking. As you face your fears and you embrace your discomfort and learn to choose something that's more important to you, you'll find that anxiety no longer controls you, not only will you have control of your life and your world will open up but a huge amount of that anxiety will go away. You can rewire your own brain by interrupting the anxiety cycle and gradually facing your fears.

In reading this, you are someone who is pro-actively involved in your own healing journey, you are seeking to move on and forward from anxiety, and so this very action speaks volumes to me, and I hope it does to you... keep going, you've got this!

In the words of the remarkable Dr Wayne Dyer 'when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.'

Thanks for reading, here's to your health and happiness and may you enjoy the experiences that your divine heart calls to experience. Hands in the clay, feet moving forward, eyes locking eyes, open-ended conversations, out to dinner -for one. You, it's all you and may you taste every drop with your fears-facing-forward. One small action at a time, ease and flow you go.

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