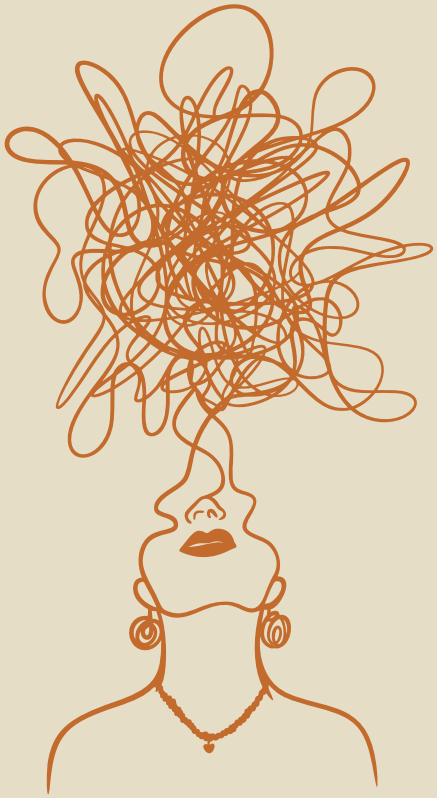
THE Barn

ANXIETY & OVERTHINKING WORKBOOK

A practical guide to understanding anxiety and working with your nervous system



Produced by: Kate Robbins Coaching

The Barn Wellbeing Centre, Brailes,
Nr Shipston On Stour, OX15 5JH
info@retreattothebarn.co.uk

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

YOUR RETREAT WORKBOOK

Thank you for attending our Anxiety Relief Retreat at The Barn. We hope you enjoyed your day and find the following information useful and informative.

This workbook is designed to support you as you continue to manage your anxiety in the weeks and months after your retreat. It is practical, grounded, and deliberately unfussy.

Use this as a reference, a reminder, and a place to experiment. And remember, overcoming anxiety takes time and patience, but it is possible.

This workbook is intended as a supportive reference; use what helps, leave what doesn't, and seek professional support if anxiety feels overwhelming or unmanageable.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

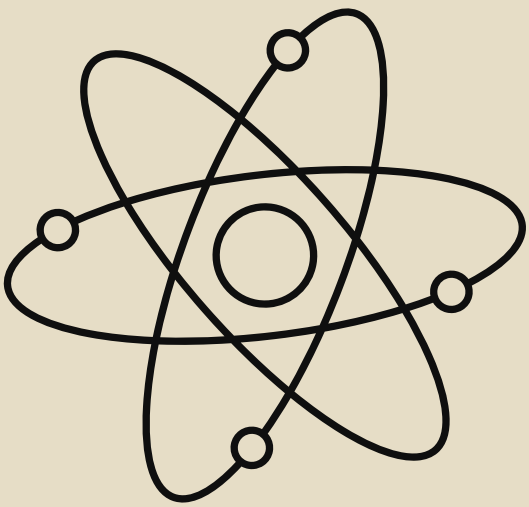
THE SCIENCE OF ANXIETY

Anxiety is not a character flaw or a lack of resilience. It is a biological response to perceived threat.

Your brain's primary job is survival, not happiness. When it senses danger (real or imagined), it activates the stress response.

This involves:

- The amygdala detecting threat
- The nervous system switching into fight, flight, freeze or fawn
- The release of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol



The nervous system does not reliably distinguish between:

- A tiger
- An argument
- A memory
- A future worry

If your body reacts, it treats it as real.

This is why anxiety can feel overwhelming even when you logically know you are safe.

Anxiety is experienced in the body because it is a bodily process. Common symptoms include, tight chest, shallow breathing, racing heart, nausea, dizziness, shaking, feeling unreal or disconnected.

These sensations are uncomfortable but not dangerous. They are signs of activation, not harm.

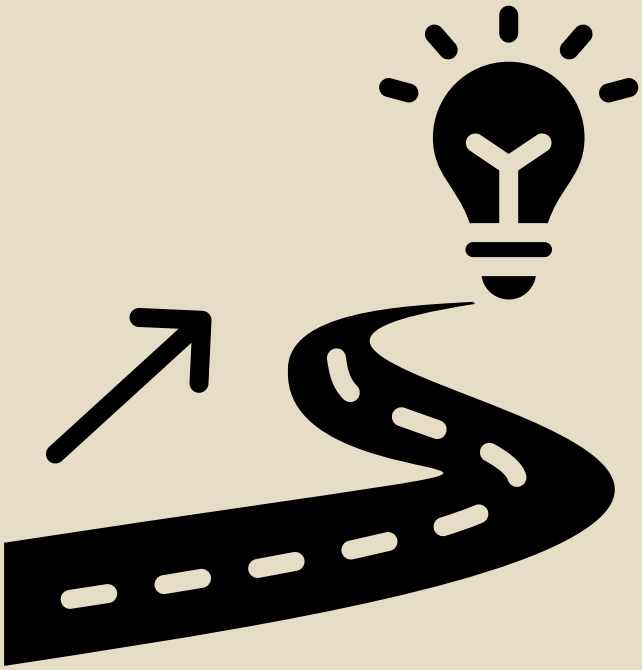
KATE ROBBINS COACHING

ANXIETY & THE BRAIN

Everyday anxiety is a normal and necessary part of being human. It keeps us alert, helps us respond to danger, and prepares the body to act when something feels off.

Anxiety becomes a problem when the brain's threat system starts reacting too often, or in situations that are no longer dangerous. This can happen for many reasons, including trauma, chronic health conditions, prolonged stress, or burnout. Sometimes there is no single obvious cause. It is often the result of repeated experiences over time.

The human brain is designed to be efficient. When it encounters a new experience, it starts to store information about it. If that experience is repeated, the brain strengthens the connection until it forms a neurological pathway.



KATE ROBBINS COACHING

NEUROPLASTICITY

These pathways allow the brain to respond quickly and automatically to familiar situations. This is usually helpful. It means we do not have to consciously think through every decision or response.

However, if anxiety or threat is present repeatedly, the brain can begin to build strong pathways around danger detection. Once this happens, the nervous system may react automatically, even when the current situation does not require it.



This is how anxiety becomes chronic. The brain is no longer assessing each situation clearly. Instead, it relies on learned pathways and past experiences to predict threat.

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change these pathways.
Just as the brain learned to respond with anxiety, it can also learn new, safer responses through repeated experience, practice, and exposure to regulation. The brain is not broken. It is adaptable.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

PRACTICAL STEPS

The following pages are designed to support the practical steps discussed in the workshop. These tools work best when used together.

As in the workshop, the steps are outlined in three broad categories: lifestyle, in-the-moment support, and long-term change.

Not everything will work for everyone, and these are not quick fixes. Lasting change takes time, repetition, and effort.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

LIFESTYLE

Your nervous system is constantly responding to your environment. When your external world is busy, inconsistent, or under sustained stress, this doesn't just increase anxiety in the moment. It also makes it much harder to create meaningful change or regain a sense of control over how you feel.

Lifestyle changes are not about fixing anxiety directly. They are about lowering the overall load.

Sleep - Inconsistent or poor-quality sleep increases baseline anxiety. When the body is tired, the nervous system becomes more reactive and less resilient. The aim is not perfect sleep, but predictable sleep.

Movement helps discharge stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Without movement, this activation can stay trapped in the body and feed anxiety.
When anxiety is present, gentle movement is often more regulating than intense exercise.

Nutrition - What and when you eat has a direct impact on anxiety symptoms.
Things to be aware of include:

- Blood sugar swings can increase anxious sensations
- Caffeine can amplify physical anxiety symptoms such as a racing heart or jitteriness
- Regular meals help support nervous system stability

This is not about restriction or rigid rules. It is about giving your body steady, reliable support.

Sensory Environment - Your nervous system takes in information constantly through the senses. Light, noise, clutter, and pace all contribute to how safe or stressed the body feels.
Calm is not something you find. It is something you create.

Small environmental changes can significantly reduce background stress and make anxiety easier to manage.

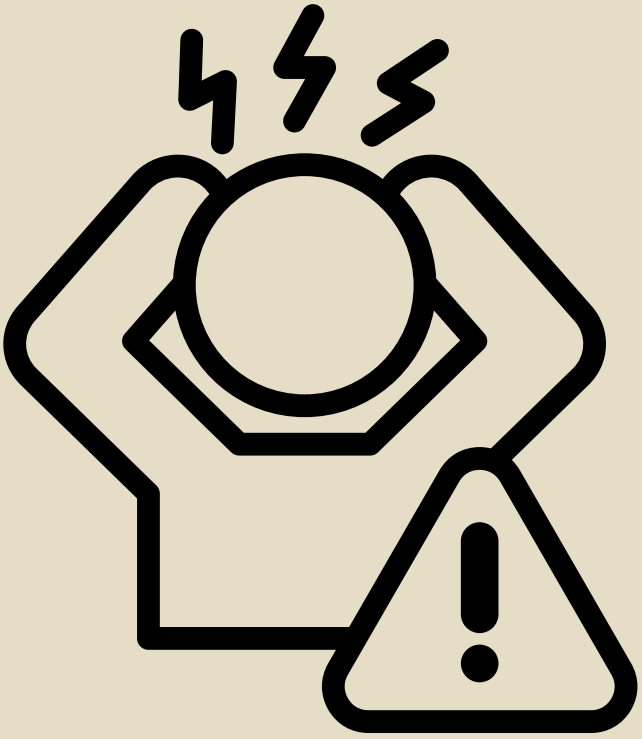
KATE ROBBINS COACHING

IN THE MOMENT INTERVENTIONS

These tools are for times when anxiety is already present and active in the body. The aim is not to make anxiety disappear. Trying to stop it often increases resistance and intensity. Instead, the goal is to signal safety to the nervous system so activation can settle naturally.

Movement to Burn Off Adrenaline - When anxiety is high, the body is full of stress hormones designed for action. Sitting still can trap this energy and make symptoms feel worse. Movement can help the body complete the stress response.

Even short bursts of movement can reduce intensity by allowing adrenaline to discharge.



KATE ROBBINS COACHING

IN THE MOMENT INTERVENTIONS

Breathing techniques - can be helpful, but timing matters. For some people, focusing on the breath during high anxiety can increase panic rather than reduce it.

Helpful approaches tend to be:

- Slow exhale breathing
- Counting breaths rather than controlling them
- Breathing while moving

If focused breathing increases panic, stop. Breathing is not a test you need to pass.



Orientation & Grounding - Anxiety pulls attention inward and toward threat. Orientation and grounding work by gently directing attention outward and into the present moment.

- Name five things you can see
- Feel your feet on the floor
- Touch something solid or textured
- Running your hand or wrists under cold water

These practices help the brain register that you are safe right now.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

IN THE MOMENT INTERVENTIONS

Anxiety and excitement - are physiologically the same process. The difference between them is only the story the mind attaches to the sensation.



When the sensation is labelled as anxiety, the brain prepares for danger. When it is labelled as excitement, the body experiences the same activation as anticipation rather than threat.

This does not mean forcing yourself to “be positive.” It means experimenting with a different interpretation.

Even a small shift in interpretation can reduce fear and prevent escalation.

Language Shifts - The way you speak to yourself during anxiety can either increase alarm or reduce it. Helpful internal language acknowledges discomfort without adding threat. Try phrases like:

“This is uncomfortable, not dangerous.”
“My brain is doing that thing again"

You are not trying to eliminate anxiety. You are helping your nervous system feel safe enough to settle.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

IN THE MOMENT INTERVENTIONS

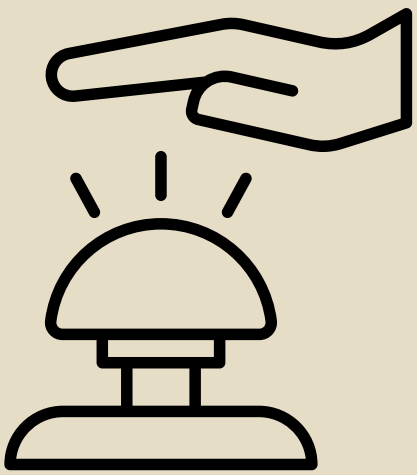
Meet Your Nervous System Where It Is - Not everyone calms down by going quiet or still. For some people, silence, stillness, or slow breathing can actually increase anxiety. If your nervous system is highly activated, trying to suddenly “slam on the brakes” can feel impossible and may make things worse.

For many people, it is more effective to meet the body at its current level of activation and then gradually slow things down.

Examples include:

- Starting with higher-tempo music and slowly lowering the pace
- Using bigger, more energetic movements before transitioning to gentler ones
- Walking before sitting
- Stretching before lying down

The aim is regulation, not suppression. Calm often comes through a gradual downshift rather than an abrupt stop.



KATE ROBBINS COACHING

LONG TERM BRAIN WORK

This section focuses on changing patterns (neurological pathways) over time rather than managing symptoms in the moment. Anxiety reduces when the brain learns, through repeated experience, that situations are survivable and do not require constant protection. This kind of change happens gradually, not through insight alone.



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) - CBT works with the relationship between thoughts, behaviours, and emotional responses. Anxious thoughts often arise automatically and feel factual, even when they are based on assumptions rather than evidence. The aim is not to eliminate thoughts or replace them with positive ones, but to introduce balance and flexibility.

CBT is often misunderstood. It is not designed to process past trauma in depth, but to work with current thoughts, behaviours, and responses that maintain anxiety. CBT is very effective for anxiety, but it has limits. If anxiety is driven by deeper nervous system patterns, CBT works best alongside other approaches rather than on its own.

More information is available via the NHS website:
https://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

LONG TERM BRAIN WORK

Somatic tracking focuses on noticing physical sensations in the body without trying to change, fix, or stop them. Anxiety is experienced physically as well as mentally. When sensations are interpreted as dangerous, the nervous system stays activated. Somatic tracking helps retrain this response by building tolerance and safety around bodily sensations.



The aim is not to relax or make symptoms go away, but to observe them with curiosity rather than fear.

Example:

- Notice a physical sensation, such as a tight chest or racing heart
- Describe it neutrally: pressure, warmth, movement, intensity
- Allow the sensation to be present without analysing or resisting it
- Notice if it changes, stays the same, or passes on its own

Over time, this teaches the brain that these sensations are uncomfortable but not harmful. Somatic tracking works by changing the nervous system's response through experience rather than thought.

KATE ROBBINS COACHING

LONG TERM BRAIN WORK

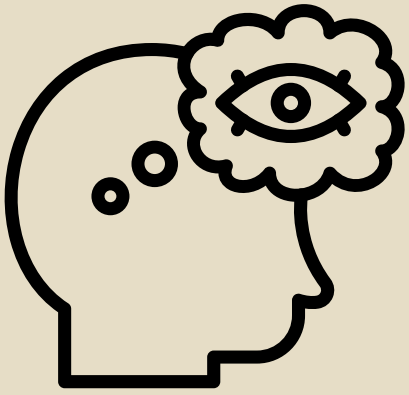
Visualisation uses the brain's ability to learn from imagined experience. The nervous system responds to mental rehearsal in a similar way to real-life situations, which makes visualisation a useful tool for reducing anxiety around upcoming events.

Anxiety often focuses on what might go wrong. Visualisation gently shifts this by helping the brain practise coping in advance.
The aim is not to imagine everything going perfectly, but to build familiarity and a sense of capability.

Example

- Picture the upcoming event, such as a meeting or travelling
- Imagine yourself arriving, settling, and moving through the situation
- Include realistic details such as sounds, posture, and pace
- Visualise yourself handling moments of discomfort calmly and competently

Focus on coping, not control or perfection. Over time, this reduces uncertainty and helps the nervous system approach the situation with less alarm. Visualisation works best when practised regularly and paired with real-world exposure.



KATE ROBBINS COACHING

A FINAL NOTE

This workbook is designed to accompany the Anxiety Relief Retreat and reflect the themes and tools discussed on the day. It is not intended to be a standalone guide and does not include everything covered during the retreat.

Its purpose is to act as a reminder and reference point, helping you revisit ideas and practices in your own time.

This workbook is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice. If you are experiencing significant distress, worsening symptoms, or are in crisis, please seek support from a qualified healthcare professional or emergency services.

Any external links or resources included are provided for information only. We are not responsible for the content, accuracy, or outcomes of third-party websites or services.

If anxiety feels unmanageable or does not begin to ease over time, working with a trained professional can provide additional support and guidance.