

# SETTLING THE ANXIETY RESPONSE



Understanding what is  
happening in your body and  
mind to make helpful changes

by Jo du Preez

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# What is anxiety?

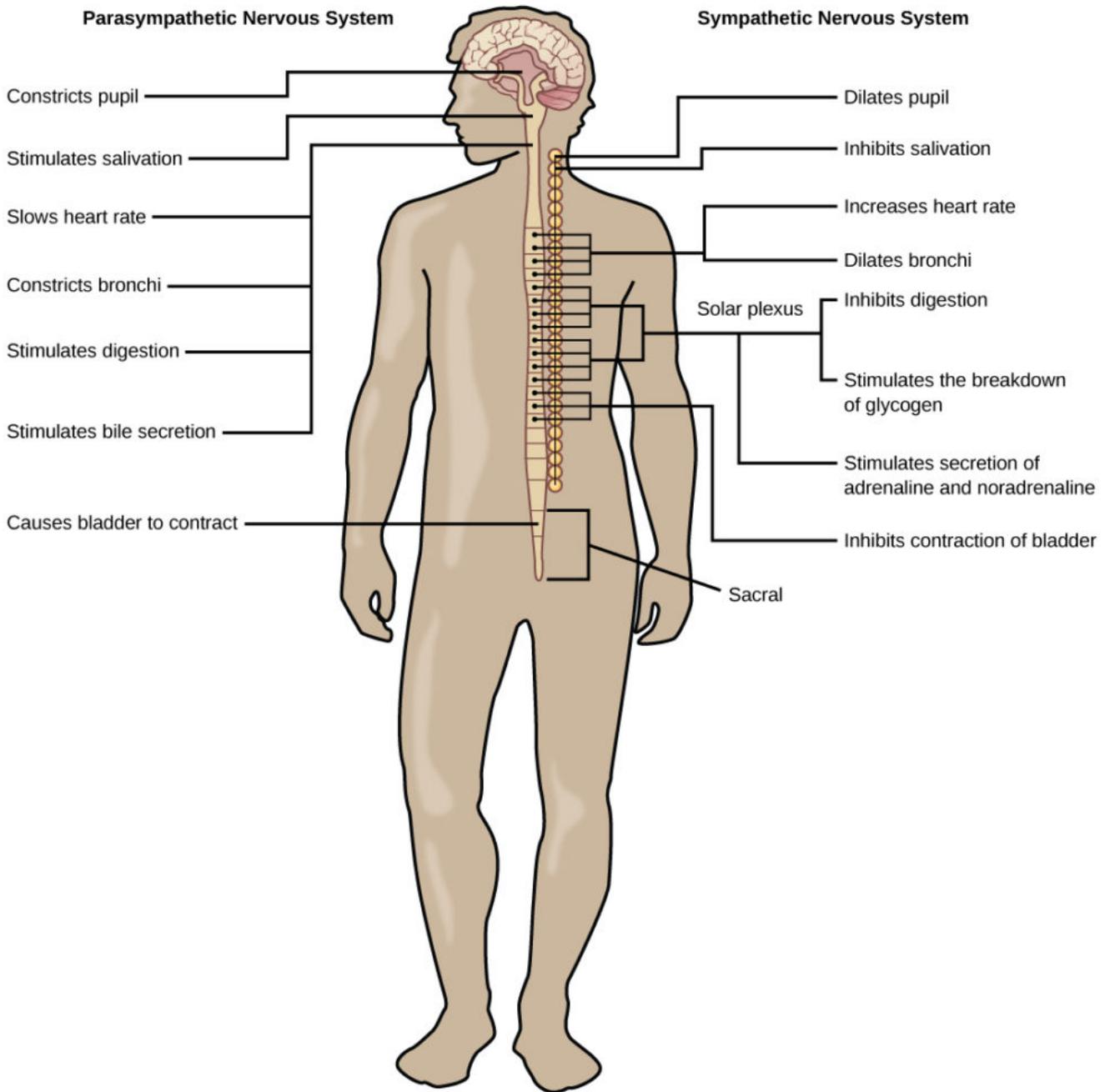
Anxiety can feel like a crazy thing completely out of our control. In actual fact, it feels so useless and mad that we can often be very harsh with ourselves. Thoughts such as “I am being stupid” or “this is ridiculous” might come to mind. Or maybe we are ashamed that we feel it at all and want to hide it away. It is as if we want to punish ourselves for feeling this stupid thing.



But is it really stupid? Anxiety is not truly a mindless thing, no matter how silly or out of control we feel. It is an important and incredibly helpful aspect of being a human. At one time it served us very well, ensuring our survival and the continued existence of the human species. When we were still running around on the savannahs hunting animals and being hunted in turn, our body’s automatic anxiety response was very helpful indeed.

When we received a fright or felt endangered our body would react without having to wait for our brain to join the party, and this would often mean the difference between literal life and death. Either this sabretooth munched us as we hung around to consider our options, or we managed to skedaddle which allowed us to see one more day. This is called a [sympathetic process](#), meaning that it is controlled by the [sympathetic nervous system](#) which controls our automatic fight or flight responses. One of the consequences of this automatic instant response is that it tends to be an all or nothing reaction – I don’t flee a little, I flee a lot.

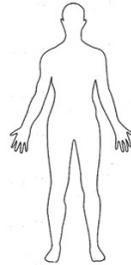
# Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous System



When our sympathetic nervous system is activated by an external event our brain signals our kidneys to release adrenaline and noradrenaline from glands in the kidneys, which spurs your body into action until either the chemicals are burned out or the

parasympathetic system sends us the signals that we can now relax and let down our guard.

## Physical Responses



These chemicals have very real effects on our physical body as we prepare to fight for our lives or run away to live another day. Our hearts will start beating strongly, pumping blood away from our extremities (e.g. fingers and toes) and into our major muscles and organs. This can lead to the numb or tingly feeling in our extremities and the heart palpitations we feel when anxious. It also increases our breathing rate to ensure that we are getting enough oxygen in to pump to the major muscles and organs for this strenuous activity our body is expecting.

We can start gasping, feeling dizzy and sometimes feel as if we are hyperventilating. Our pupils will dilate which can cause spots in front of our eyes, saliva can decrease resulting in a dry mouth and we can start sweating. Even the hair on our body will feel as if it is standing up, mainly because when we were still hairy apes we would have made an impressive spectacle with all our hair fluffed like that. In short, all the symptoms of anxiety or very common-sense physical responses to the activation of the sympathetic nervous system through a signal that warns it of danger. And make no mistake, that is what your brain is telling you. You are in dire danger.



But what happens when we are no longer being hunted on the savannah? Our body hasn't changed much in the last few thousand years, yet we still have all these physical and emotional responses. We have evolved to respond to stressful stimuli with a physical response. Except that now our activating events are work stress, or a fight with a loved one, or a confrontation with an angry boss. We are no longer in physical danger, but our brains have not yet cottoned on to that fact. It is trying to save your life with an outdated method that is no longer accurate or always that helpful. You will sure be glad for that process when you touch a hot stovetop and that very same system helps you pull your hand away before you can even become aware that you have burned yourself though.

## Breathing



So how do we combat this response? This question is part of the problem. We do not have to fight ourselves. We have not done anything wrong and our unconscious responses are actually trying to help us. Instead of turning on ourselves and our body as if it is the enemy, there are some things we can do that can embrace our feelings in a more compassionate manner while still settling our body's physical responses. But remember, the body is only one part of this equation. We will think about the other half – our mind – later.

The body's physical responses can be hard to deal with. One that is often the hardest to deal with and the most distressing is the shortness of breath and racing heart. We know now that this is our body trying to get us ready for some real physical exertion as we either fight the good fight or literally run for our lives. It is making sure we gulp in enough oxygen to feed the major muscles and organs, pumping our heart furiously to get all that necessary oxygen where it needs to go to do the most good. It is trying to help, but in reality we can often be left feeling as if we are dying. We fear that we might pass out, or that we might have a heart attack or that something horrible is going to happen to us.



This is an automatic physical response and we can't fight it, but we can trick it into settling down. The simplest way of doing this is giving the body exactly what it needs: enough oxygen in a controlled and calming manner. Not only do we satisfy our physical need in that moment, but we are starting to sooth our psychological need. We feel stressed when we feel out of control, threatened or overwhelmed. Good deep breathing exercises can help us feel more in control of our body, calm in our mind and give us a small thinking space to re-orientate ourselves.

## **TRY IT:**

When doing this soothing breathing there are a few essential pointers:

- Breathe deep and slowly (feel your belly move with the breath instead of your chest or shoulders)
- Be present in the breathing and focus your mind and attention on it – be mindful of it instead of succumbing to the automatic drive to lose yourself in your body responses
- Do only what you are capable of – be kind and compassionate to your needs because when we push ourselves beyond our ability in that moment we are feeding into that critical inner voice that is telling us we should do more or better. That guy is not welcome here.

## **The 4-8-7 Breathing Technique**

The 4-8-7 method is probably the best known, but there is no rule to the amount of time you do each step. Some people prefer a simpler 5-5-5 count. You cannot make a mistake here, so take some of the pressure off yourself.

Find a quiet, comfortable spot where you can stand or sit without interruption. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.

Take a DEEP 4 second breath (or 5 if that is easier). Pay attention to feeling first the hand on your chest move up and then the hand on your stomach as your lungs fill. It is important that you breathe deep into your belly, making the hand on your belly move the most.

Hold that breath for 8 seconds (or 5 if that is easier) and focus on the breath, thinking about that oxygen being absorbed into your body. Don't hold it if you are feeling light-headed or out of breath. Sometimes we can build up our tolerance as our body settles, but we do not want to force ourselves to do something distressing or unpleasant at this point.

Then exhale **STRONGLY** for 7 seconds (or another 5 if that is easier), really pushing the breath out as you feel first the hand on your stomach dropping down and then the hand on your chest. Make sure that during this your shoulders remain relaxed and low.

So how are we tricking our body by doing this? Firstly, we are giving it what it desperate wants: enough oxygen. But we are also forcing it to make use of that oxygen by holding our breath. And finally, we are expelling as much carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) as we possibly can. CO<sub>2</sub> will build up if we allow the hyperventilating process to continue which reduces the amount of oxygen in our body by comparison. But by mindfully expelling as much CO<sub>2</sub> as possible we remove that physical trigger, we reassure our bodies that we have sufficient oxygen AND we are telling our mind that we are in control, that we are mindful and that in actual fact we are not in danger.

## Muscle Relaxation



One of the strange things anxiety can do to us is cause body and muscle pain. Sometimes it can seem unrelated to our emotional state and an increased worry about

what our body is physically feeling can actually add to our anxiety and stress. But the link between the body and mind, for example childhood trauma or stress and autoimmune diseases, is well known.

One reason for this is that as our sympathetic system activates, it is getting our muscles ready for strenuous activity – we must run for our lives or literally fight off an attacker. Our muscles tense, blood flow is diverted from extremities and redirected to major muscles and organs, our pupils dilate, we are gasping for oxygen and might feel a bit lightheaded. These were all very helpful responses once (and still are when we are dodging out of the way of an oncoming vehicle). But sometimes it is not the response that will be the most helpful in our current situation. When there is no external enemy or monster to fight – when the fight is in our head – that action response is making us uncomfortable and causing us more distress. We already looked at how our breathing can ‘trick’ our body into relaxing.

Another thing that we can ‘trick’ is our muscle response. By actively helping our body to do the opposite of this panic response we can help our parasympathetic system (the one that pretty much does the opposite of our fight-or-flight and tells our body we are back out of danger) to reassert balance and reduce our stress response. One of the simplest and most effective ways of doing this is through muscle relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, yoga or even body mindfulness.

## **TRY IT:**

Progressive muscle relaxation (developed in the 1920s by Dr Edmund Jacobson) is a great technique that requires no training, no equipment and only a quiet space to sit or lie down. Start with the deep belly breathing we discussed, making sure to focus your attention on the breath coming in and out of your body.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Starting at your feet, clench the muscles tightly, hold it for a few seconds and then release entirely. Flex the muscles and relax again. Pay attention to the difference between the tension and the tightness when you clenched. Do it again if necessary to help you really focus on it. Then move up to your calves, thighs, stomach, down your arms and finally your shoulders, neck and face as you clench tightly and then let go.

What are we doing? Firstly, we are soothing that hyper-aroused (hyper meaning too much) system that wants us to clench and be ready for action. We are sending it signals that tells it that we can stand down: look, I am calm and slowly relaxing. Secondly, we are taking advantage of the fact that (despite the myth about the female mystique) human brains really cannot multi-task that well. When we give it something to occupy (e.g. deep breathing exercises, mindfulness or even gradual muscle relaxation) it forgets to focus on the panic. Much the same way we can forget about a lingering headache as we become absorbed in something only to realise it is still hanging around when we come back into ourselves. And thirdly we are becoming aware of our own being, that we are safe, that we are in our bodies and that the thing that felt out of our control (the hyperventilation or body ache) is actually something that we can **gradually** learn to settle and bring back into our own ability to mediate.

## Visualisation



We have been thinking about what our bodies are doing and why. We also thought about ways to settle the physical responses by ‘tricking’ our parasympathetic system into activating a relax-response.

Another way to let our system, which thinks that we are in danger or distress, know that it is okay to calm down is through the practice of visualisation. As we have discovered, anxiety is part body and part mind. [Our mind is reacting to distress as if it was a literal endangerment, triggering the fight-or-flight response in our body.](#) Visualisation can be a great technique to bring our mind back into a safe space. By creating a strong sensory visualisation of a space or moment that make us feel calm, safe and peaceful we can reinforce this parasympathetic relax-response. Studies have found that the changes to the brainwaves during meditation are physically measurable – again body and mind are interacting in an intimate manner. By using visualisation and engaging our physical sensations in this practice we are linking this mind/body response and using one to help soothe the other.

## **TRY IT:**

In a calm and quiet spot make yourself comfortable either sitting or lying down. Think of a moment or place that helps you to feel calm, peaceful and safe. Many people like to think of a beach, a field, a river or even a room in grandmother’s home where they felt particularly happy.

Flesh out this space in your imagination. Think of the colours around you, the textures and patterns you can see. Now bring your other senses into the space. What can you hear? If it is the beach, can you hear the waves or the seagulls? What can you feel? Is there something underneath you? What is the weather like? What can you smell? The salt on the air, your dog’s fur, nan’s baking? Can you taste anything? Possibly the

memory of an ice-cream you had on this beach? Make it as vivid as you can, truly engaging all your senses as fully as you possible.

Focus on the deep sense of calm and safety. This is your space only, no one can intrude on it. This is your mind sanctuary. What we are doing is twofold. As previously discussed, the brain is just not that good at multi-tasking. It does two things badly or one thing very well. We want it to do this one thing very well, because it will take its focus off the other things in order to do so, which includes the focus on the stress response. In this way we are refocusing the brain on the sense of safety rather than the perception of danger.

Secondly, we want to reassure our biological fear-response that there is in actual fact no need for its participation at this time. We want to say to ourselves ‘thank you for trying to help me, but I don’t need it right now’.

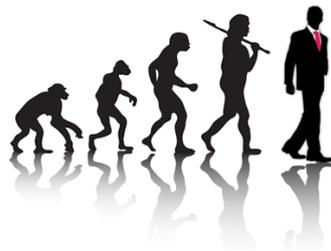
As with any other mental health muscle, this is a technique that needs practicing; it will be easier to practice in times when we are actually feeling safe and not in the midst of an anxiety response. But eventually we will be able to utilise this technique in the whirlwind of anxiety and panic as well, helping us to bring our hyper-aroused response back down and create some space in order for us to be more in control and conscious of what is happening for us.

It is important to remember that all these physical techniques are not ways to avoid feeling anxious or fearful. They are only techniques meant to help us create the space in our bodies to regulate our physical response and create a place where we can then proceed to become aware of the event and reactions to it that triggered this cycle. It is much like having indigestion, we want to be able to use an antacid to settle the reflux to make the moment more bearable, but the actual goal will be to find out what we ate that made us feel unwell and learn to manage our diet instead.

# Psychological Responses



We have taken some time to think about what is happening in our body during anxiety and panic responses. Hopefully one of the main things we have become aware of is how automatic and out of control this physical response can be. And that is because in many ways it is very a very natural response. We have evolved to respond to threat and danger in this way physically, except that as our times have changed and modern stressors are now often mental and emotional our bodies have not been able to keep up. It is still responding in the same old lifesaving manner, as if the psychological distress is physical. It is trying to help. And it is doing this because it has been designed to work this way. This is something out of our control.



What is not out of our control is how we understand, process and respond to the situation that triggered our physical reaction. In many ways anxiety is our body's 'warning signal'. It is trying to catch our attention. Again it is trying to help. Except that often this type of help is no longer actually helpful, it just adds to our distress.

We looked at methods to help ease that physical response and distress. They are much like working a muscle, the more we practice them when we feel good and strong, the more they can help us when we are in need. But there are other things we can do to help become aware of what might be influencing our distress and causing our warning

signals to go off. One of the first things we can do is be kind and compassionate to ourselves. If someone woke up from a nightmare crying and upset, we would soothe them. We would reassure them that it was normal to be upset after a nightmare, but that everything was okay and they were safe now. We would be compassionate and supportive.

## COMPASSION

Yet accessing those same compassionate and supportive responses towards ourselves is a much harder thing. We often treat ourselves with the exact opposite response: harsh self-criticism and punishment. We might tell ourselves that we are being silly, that we are reacting in a weak or pathetic way or that others are tired of our needs. We might even become angry at ourselves, feel defeated or just become more frightened. These are all ways of punishing ourselves and often these responses themselves were once helpful coping mechanisms, attempts to help us to keep on living while we were feeling overwhelmed, afraid or sad. But what might happen if we were able to turn that compassionate and supportive voice we would use for our friend, loved one or child in on ourselves as well? It is well understood that bullying someone does not help them succeed or be happy, yet this is exactly what we are doing to ourselves.

### **TRY IT:**

The first step in showing ourselves some of this rightfully deserved and essential self-compassion and support is to acknowledge that what is happening right now is a process that in some ways is out of your control. We might use phrases such as “this is how I have evolved to respond to stress, I am not crazy”. By repeating these supportive phrases back to ourselves we can help move our thinking into the compassionate zone where we can build our own resilience and strength. Other phrases such as “thank you

for trying to help me by warning me with this warning signal, I can do something about this now” or “thank you for trying to help me, but this is no longer helpful and I can develop other ways to help myself” can be powerful mantras of change, moving us out of our self-punishment and into self-compassion and support.

## **The Compassionate Outsider**

Imagining ourselves in the third person (as our friends and loved ones might see us from the outside) and giving that person the same caring support that you would give any other loved one can also help to practice these supportive mantras.

As with children, it is only with loving support that they can grow and thrive. We are all like flowers in the sun. The harsh and critical inner voice is putting a bucket over that flower. In the dark and cold it will die. But if we allowed some sunshine, compassion and support to feed our flowers we can start building towards change, self-acceptance and joy.

## **The Problem Is Not The Problem**



We have taken some time to think about what anxiety is and what it does to our body. We started thinking about helpful ways to use our mind in settling anxiety responses, specifically using self-compassion. Another thing we can try to do is to identify the trigger.

‘The problem is not the problem.’ This is a way of saying that what we think is causing our upset can sometimes not be the true cause. When a thing that is upsetting feels too massive to address or is uncomfortable to think about, we can sometimes ‘shift’ that worry onto something that can feel a bit more manageable or within our control. This is not something that we consciously do but is an unconscious process that helps us to feel less overwhelmed or powerless.

For example, in this way we might think that my current anxiety is caused by the car that broke down. Prior to this incident I might have been struggling to make ends meet, know that some things are at the end of their lifespan and I am unable to replace them at this time. The car breaking down is definitely an additional upset, but it is possible that what I am really upset about is the overwhelming sense of helplessness and fear I experience at the ongoing financial concerns and stress that it causes me. But I might feel completely overwhelmed by this. The broken-down car is a much more manageable focus and something that might be slightly more within my control than the entirety of my financial worries. It does not mean that I am not worried about the car, but it does mean that if I was to fix this ‘focus issue’ the anxiety won’t magically disappear. The underlying problem is still there and will simply express itself in another presentation, possibly being late for work or getting told off by my boss. Even more often it is what this ‘focus problem’ says about *us* and how we feel about *ourselves* that causes deep distress and pain, eg. “I can never get out of this financial trouble *because I deserve bad things happening to me*”.



I might have had a telling off at work that has resulted in severe anxiety. But if I sit down and drill down to the problem underneath the problem, what I might instead find is a fear of confrontation. This might be because I had been punished growing up for

not being compliant, or a fear that I am not good enough at my job. Tomorrow my boss might be pleasant again, but the underlying distress is still unseen and might bubble out in other ways.

Sometimes just being able to lift the lid on this underlying distress – the hidden problem – can cause some relief. It also gives us a point of focus where any changes we can make might be more meaningful and longer lasting. Treating the ‘not problem’ will help that one aspect improve, but treating the ‘root problem’ might result in much longer lasting positive change.

## **TRY IT:**

How can we identify this underlying problem though? An easy way can be to find a quiet space and actively think about the problem, even writing ideas down as you do so. Start with the obvious problem – the ‘cover problem’ and write it down (for example “I had a fight with my boss”).

Then ask yourself why this is a problem. You might want to use “this is a problem because” when you write it down. Follow this up by thinking about what this problem means to *you* and *how you think about yourself*. You can do this by using “which means” when you write it down. Avoid the temptation to find another ‘fixable’ problem to focus on. Try to relate the perceived problem to your internal self-belief system.

Continue to break the problem down by using these two statements until something that feels emotive or authentic comes to light. Sometimes even multiple of these statements might show you some negative thinking about yourself.

While our lives are full of practical problems, often the emotional problems are caused by ways we interpret circumstances, but most often the ways we think about ourselves.

And when we challenge ourselves to find the ways we think about ourselves we might be surprised at the critical and painful thoughts hiding down there.

An example below is:

The problem is that I had a fight with my boss.

This is a problem because she no longer likes me which means that she will be mean to me in future.

This is a problem because I might get fired which means that I will be out of a job that I was unable to successfully keep a job.

This is a problem because I don't think I will be able to get another equivalent job which means that I don't think others will think I'm good enough at what I do.

As you can see from this example, we avoided the temptation to shift the focus onto the financial consequences of the problem (that I will be out of a job) but kept our focus on ourselves and our inner critical thoughts. And looking at this problem breakdown the critical thought becomes increasingly clearer: “I do not think I am as good as others”. Now think about this final self-statement – does this show in other areas of your life? As a parent, or a spouse, or in doing other activities, how does this negative self-statement that you identified impact and affect your life?

Only once we can uncover and confront the underlying problem can we challenge and repair it, and often this problem is not in what is happening around us, but how the things happening around us resonate with these critical inner thoughts.

# Confronting my critical inner voice



We have taken some time to think about the underlying problems and triggers of anxiety. One of these might be the critical inner thoughts that we use against ourselves.

It might seem very strange, but one of our harshest critics can be our own critical inner voice. We might tell ourselves things such as “I knew I couldn’t do this” or “I shouldn’t even have bothered”. Even thoughts such as “of course this happens to me” or “I always mess things up” can often go through our heads. We might not even notice them anymore. We might tell ourselves that we are just being realistic or even hide behind self-deprecating humour. What these critical thoughts reveal however are our very deepest beliefs about ourselves. We are not good enough, we do not deserve good things happening, we do not look good enough, we have fallen short somehow, others cannot love us, we will always fail... these are just some of the common critical inner thoughts we might have experienced.

No one wants to think bad things about themselves. It is not pleasant and does not leave us feeling very good. It might even be completely unconscious, just a stream of thoughts that we are barely aware of and that have always been there. So why would we do this?

Sometimes this is to protect ourselves. When we are told bad things about ourselves often enough, especially as children, it slowly infiltrates the way we see ourselves and we start believing it. Comments such as “why can’t you just do things right” or “you did not do as well as that other person”, or even “you are always a problem” or “you are lucky to have this/me” are just some that can cause us to believe that we are not

good enough. If we are criticised or humiliated enough times we will start doing anything not to feel those very painful feelings so acutely, and one of the ways we can help numb that pain is by accepting what we are being told. You can't hurt me by calling me ugly if I already think I am ugly, which helps me avoid that punch of pain, but also causes problems in the long term because I do not believe I deserve beautiful things. [This self-protection eventually becomes part of the problem.](#)

Another reason we might develop these critical inner thoughts are to avoid disappointment, often in ourselves. I cannot fail if I do not try, and what better way to keep myself from trying than to make it impossible to believe in my ability to succeed. We might have been humiliated for failing before or hold ourselves to such high standards that failure feels like an unbearable prospect – “I must be perfect and nothing else is good enough”-thinking.

## **TRY IT:**

A good way to identify some of these critical inner thoughts can be to sit down and make a list with three columns:

What do I think about myself?	What do people who love me think about me?	What do people who don't know me think about me?
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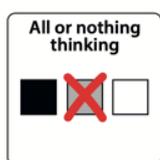
Notice where these three columns don't match and where they do. Notice all the entries in these columns that are critical or negative. Notice the positive things others might think about you that you don't. Why don't you?

Now take these negative thoughts and challenge them by writing down answers to the following questions:

- How do I know this?
- What proof do I have that this is true other than my own opinion or fears?

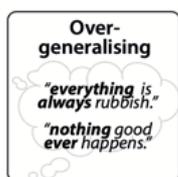
There are some common critical thought biases that we unconsciously employ that help maintain our critical inner thoughts. See which of these biases below are applicable to your list of critical or negative beliefs.

**All or nothing thinking:**



things are either all good or all bad (black and white thinking) – for example “if I am not perfect I have failed” or “I either get it right or don’t do it at all”

**Over-generalisation:**



basing a general belief on a single event – for example “I cannot trust anyone because once someone let me down” or “I cannot do anything right because I failed a test once”

**Mental filter:**



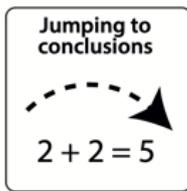
only paying attention to certain types of evidence – for example “I know I am a bad parent because my child failed a test” but ignoring all the times you might have sat with them doing homework and trying very hard to learn new things

**Disqualifying the positive:**



discounting the good things that you have done or that happened for some reason – for example “it doesn’t matter that I successfully completed this project” or “it doesn’t make a difference that I passed this exam”

**Jumping to conclusions:**



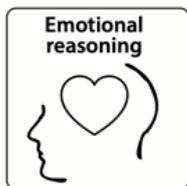
either by mind reading (I know what others are thinking – for example “they think I am fat”) or fortune telling (I can predict the future – for example “they will laugh at me if they know I want to do this new thing”)

**Magnifying (catastrophising) or minimising:** blowing things out of proportion (for example “my boss hates me and almost fired me” when it was only a request to do something that you might have missed) or downplaying them to an inappropriate degree (“it doesn’t really bother me when people hurt my feelings” – “everything is fine”)



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**Emotional reasoning:**



assuming that the way we feel means that our thoughts are true – for example I feel embarrassed which means I must be an idiot

**Should & Must haves:**



critical words such as “should”, “must” or “ought” can make us feel guilty or as if we have already failed – for example “I should have known this unexpected thing could have happened” or “I should have applied for the other job instead”

**Labelling:**



applying labels to others and ourselves – for example “I am no good at this” or “I can’t do that”

**Personalisation:**



blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn’t entirely your fault – for example “If I hadn’t driven home at this time then I wouldn’t

have had the car accident” or “if I hadn’t chosen that option then this bad thing wouldn’t have happened”

Now try and reframe these negative thoughts. Write down a ‘replacement’ thought that is more accurate (i.e. that you can prove) or more positive (that avoids these critical biases).

## The Compassionate Other & Mindful Acceptance



It can be very hard to start showing ourselves self-compassion and kindness as we learn to combat these inner critical voices. Partly this is due to habituation, thinking this way about ourselves is just so automatic that we do it instinctively, and also because we can feel guilty or selfish for wanting to focus on ourselves.

In contrast it is much easier to be compassionate and kind to others, especially people we love. We can forgive their mistakes, understand when something didn’t work out the way they planned and consider all the obstacles that might have been in their way. We appreciate them for their effort and good intentions, see their strengths and positive aspects, and appreciate them for who they are. How do we bring these abilities that we already possess towards others into our self-experience?

A helpful exercise might be to imagine the perfect compassionate other. This can be a perfectly loving and compassionate mother like figure, an expression of mother nature,

a warm bearded father figure, or even just a spirit of love and kindness. If you are religious this could form an aspect of your religious beliefs or figures.

## **TRY IT:**

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in your perfect safe space. This can be a cabin in the woods, a seaside hut, a childhood home, anything that resonates peace and safety to you. Bring it into your mind's eye, see the view through the window, smell the comforting odours in the air, feel the heat of the fireplace or sun coming through the window.

Imagine two comfortable armchairs next to each other, in front of the fireplace, in front of the window, wherever feels right. Take a seat in one and imagine your perfect compassionate other in the other. Sit down and enjoy their company, they are there because they love you and enjoy being with you as well. Practice some of the relaxation and deep breathing exercises we have already learned if it feels helpful.

Once you have reached a state of deep peace and safety, think about the negative thought or feeling that you have identified. It could be shame, fear, the thought "I am a failure" or "I am not good enough". It might help to imagine this thought or feeling as something you can hold, trapped in a transparent glass ball or in a clear plastic cube. Hold it in your hands, become aware of how this thought or feeling makes you feel, how your body feels when you think about it. Pay attention to the feeling in your chest, the feeling in your fingers and toes. Don't let it overwhelm you, but give it your full attention. Be fully aware of this thought or feeling.

Now hand the object containing this negative thought or feeling to your perfect compassionate other. They want to take this from you because they love and care for you. Imagine them taking it, considering it, and then forgiving it. Imagine what they

might say to you. What would their words be? It might be “this is not who you truly are” or “this was just one instance and does not define you”. It might even be “I do not want you to think/feel this way about yourself”. Hear their words, feel their care and support. Imagine them taking this object, now made lighter through compassion and self-love, and putting it in a basket at their feet. Remember, they are a perfectly compassionate reflection of you.

Repeat this process with the negative thoughts or feelings that you want to mindfully challenge and compassionately forgive. Do not push yourself too hard. You can do this exercise again tomorrow.

Once you are finished, take a moment to sit silently and peacefully with your perfect compassionate other. They want to be there with you and enjoy your company as much as you enjoy theirs. Now say goodbye. They will come visit again, whenever you need them. They pick up the basket, holding it carefully because they love every aspect of you, and take it with them as they leave.

Enjoy your safe space for a second longer and then open your eyes. Now take a deep belly breath and let it out slowly. As you empty the breath, feel the empty space fill up with self-compassion and acceptance.

## Conclusion

We hope that this booklet offered some ideas and techniques that feel useful to you in your process of learning about anxiety, what it does to your body and how can challenge it using your body and mind.

We human beings are complicated, multi-dimensional beings. Very little of what we do is mindless or crazy. We can cut ourselves some slack even as we start the journey of self-discovery and change. Self-care isn't selfish. Good luck on your journey!

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